

# Hard truths about Singapore's future

As the nation celebrates its 50th birthday, some of the country's leading entrepreneurs share their thoughts and visions in a roundtable discussion





**BiZQ: What are your thoughts about Singapore's success over the last 50 years?**

**David Leong:** I am a product of Singapore's experiment in education. I was born in 1970 and we were the cohort who underwent major educational re-structuring, including streaming. The economic impact of the restructuring is evident from generations of cohorts and we can see that Singapore's success essentially hinges on our good educational output and focus. As a whole, Singapore is doing very well. I rejoice in our SG50 celebration and hope that Singapore can continue with our "can-do" spirit – a small country with big aspirations.

**GS Sareen:** History judges success, and it is now judging what has happened to Singapore in the last 50 years. We need to continuously reinvent ourselves to keep us relevant with the times; we need to be contemporary in our thoughts because that is moving with the times. The world is very volatile now, and there are new disruptive





technologies emerging every day. The world going forward will be very different from what it is, and we have to stay current.

**Derek Goh:** An amazing feat – and I say this not because I am Singaporean too. We have had three generations of leaders and the fourth is rising.

The vision 50 years ago was to be a “First World Oasis in a Third World Region” – today we are closer to this than ever before. From a small country with no natural resources and an insufficient water supply amongst other woes, we have grown to be a globally known metropolis. Going forward, we need to continue to build on the strong foundation that has been laid and not be complacent.

**Fang Koh Look:** Exemplifying itself as a meritocratic country and society, Singapore achieved many milestones over the last 50 years, and continues to do so and lead by example. Many had the impression that Singapore as a small and land-scarce country would fail to succeed. This has been proven otherwise. Today, Singapore is a modernised first-world country standing tall and proud.

**BiZQ:** Are you optimistic about the direction of the Singapore economy over the next 50 years?

**Leong:** Fifty years is a blip in nation building. Our 50-year growth in Singapore was phenomenal, extraordinary and miraculous. I am absolutely, in no uncertain terms, optimistic and bullish about Singapore and whether we remain at the top of our game will depend on our nation’s resilience, adaptability and fighting spirit. I hope that we can be steadfast in our focus and keep our Singapore story going.

**Sareen:** The whole business scene is shifting towards Asia, and Singapore

**Fang Koh Look**

Chief Executive Officer of workplace safety training company Absolute Kinetics Consultancy



“Singapore’s skilled workforce and focus on R&D will help compete with emerging economies in the region”

— FANG KOH LOOK

is perfectly positioned to capitalise on this. The leadership has figured out that they don’t have the mass, but they have the geography to attract talent to come here, which can then leverage the population mass around us. China and India are huge

markets, but they are still building on their transportation networks, healthcare systems or efficient legal systems that are essential for building a more favourable business environment. This positions Singapore perfectly to participate in these markets.

**Goh:** Yes, I am definitely optimistic. Presently, we have strong economic fundamentals built upon political stability to drive economic growth, coupled with the government’s foresight in building a First World infrastructure. Going forward, we can also expect bigger plans to propel



Singapore further. For example, we have the Smart Nation Programme as well as the Changi Airport's Jewel project. This will attract more visitors and travellers, helping to fuel economic growth.

**Fang:** I am cautiously optimistic of the Singapore economy over the next 50 years. We may see the emergence of more competitive economies, especially within Southeast Asia. Emerging neighbouring countries with natural resources and a sizeable and knowledgeable workforce may open up new challenges to the Singapore economy. Singapore's existing focus on R&D, alongside a trained and skilled workforce will ensure that we are well prepared for these challenges to come.

**BiZQ: What do you think will be the key drivers of growth going forward?**

**Leong:** For us to continue with this pace of growth we need to be plugged in with individual ASEAN countries and the ASEAN Economic Community to remain relevant. We can arbitrage on economic opportunities across borders by helping with originating, arbitraging, financing, syndicating, building infrastructure projects, trade and deal flows and data flows. Singapore can be positioned as the convenient one-stop location with stable infrastructure and a transparent and recognised legal framework.

**Sareen:** Growth will fundamentally still come from the MNCs. The

way the economy is structured the best talent go into politics, then the professions. Business is still not top choice. Of course there are exceptions of world-class entrepreneurs like Ron Sim. With that set up we are best positioned to provide an attractive platform for large corporations to operate from.

**Goh:** Looking ahead, we may anticipate a shift in growth drivers. While manufacturing continues to account for a big part of our economy, we can expect the rising trend of the Internet of Things (IOT) and Big Data Analytics to be important growth drivers going forward. Singapore as a financial and service hub must constantly evolve and find ways to stay ahead of the game, especially in Southeast Asia. In

“Singapore needs to figure out how to leverage the growth of rising giants such as Indonesia and India”

— DAVID LEONG

**David Leong**

Managing  
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**GS Sareen**

Chief Executive  
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Omni United



fact, the increasing use of robotics and factory automation will improve the efficiency and productivity and thus could attract more high-end production into Singapore.

**Fang:** I foresee innovation as the main key driver to drive the economy forward. Economies become highly competitive. In land- resource- and manpower-scarce Singapore, having a leading edge, for example in technology and automation, will give the country a major boost in economic growth. Other key drivers include policies that Singapore adopts so that businesses, especially SMEs, can thrive and remain competitive both locally and regionally. Singapore must not only rely on MNCs to spur growth. Our country needs more favourable

“Growth will fundamentally still come from MNCs – Singapore needs to be able to attract talent from abroad”

– GS SAREEN

ecosystems for SMEs to thrive and eventually to become significant drivers of our economy.

**BiZQ: What are the key challenges and risks facing local businesses in the longer-term?**

**Leong:** Our big neighbours are developing fast and Singapore must

find its own momentum to run ahead. Indonesia and India are emerging faster with their new leaders and new ideas. We cannot stand still but constantly find new ways where we can leverage these big countries' growth. How can we provide the wind beneath their wings?

**Sareen:** The big challenge is not having enough talent. The structure of society needs to change for things to pick up for Singapore to become a major player in its own right. Why can't a Singapore company be doing something big? We need to dream big.

**Goh:** There is a need to recognise the changing landscape on which local businesses play on. In terms of economies of scale and availability



of the talent pool, local businesses will tend to lose out as compared to companies operating in larger countries. Recognising this, local businesses must move beyond Singapore, attract good foreign business partners and grow brands that are accepted and respected globally.

**Fang:** As a local entrepreneur, tackling rising business costs remains the utmost priority for SMEs. Inflation will also add heavily to operating costs. While being risk averse may derail future business expansion plans, local businesses must strike a balance between productivity and profitability, and learn to properly utilise the limited resources SMEs have for business growth without affecting their bottom line.

**BiZQ:** **The late Mr Lee Kuan Yew wrote about the hard truths to keep Singapore going. What do you think are some of the hard truths that Singaporeans need to understand and deal with before the country can progress?**

**Leong:** Our lack of critical natural resources, water and a contracting population still plague us persistently. Though we mitigated water scarcity with technology, our problems still persist. We cannot take this scarcity of resources as natural and that we can perpetually balance ourselves without the strong hand of our able government. We are a nation that is always a work-in-progress. Hence, that accommodative mentality is very important to carry us through. In neighbouring countries, they can withstand coups, governments toppling or a gridlocked parliament. Personally, I do not think Singapore could withstand such thuds as we may not recover so well. The fall may be fatal.

**Sareen:** Singapore has created an identity of its own, and that's great.

Now there is only one way to go – forward – aggressively. We as a nation need to, in all sincerity, put in our bit towards nation building, contribute where we can with labour, intellect, resources or even thoughts and ideas. We cannot take anything for granted.

**Goh:** There are many of these, but first and foremost we have to recognise that Singapore is a small country and therefore every citizen becomes all the more important. Each citizen has his or her role to play and one should put national interests before self in order for Singapore to remain competitive and resilient.

At the same time, Singaporeans should also recognise that the world does not owe us a living, and embrace meritocracy – the bedrock upon which Singapore has been built on. Our history has also taught us the importance of exceptional leadership and safeguards. Looking ahead, this cannot change.

**Fang:** I think Singaporeans will need to understand that our society is becoming heterogeneous. Rather than segregating racially, Singaporeans can be forthcoming in promoting cultural assimilation and social integration. There are certainly advantages in a multilingual, multicultural society.

**Derek Goh**

Executive Chairman  
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“Local businesses must move beyond Singapore, attract good foreign business partners and grow their brand” – DEREK GOH