Vladimir Lenin famously asked, “What is to be done?” Like Lenin, Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew always had an answer to that question. Lee was so driven to decision and activity that he always knew absolutely what was to be done and, usually, how it was to be done. His only doubts were about how competently his subordinates could carry out his wishes. For most of his adult life, Lee was a goal-oriented man of decision who also had the power to impose his decisions without facing many restraints, checks, or balances. Neither complacency nor restless indecision stood in his way. He could not bear the thought of himself or other people enjoying life without a goal.

In March 1965, when he was struggling to maintain Singapore’s place in Malaysia—and probably already fearful that he might be detained by the government in Kuala Lumpur—he found time to pontificate publicly along these lines:

You have got to believe in something. You are not just building houses in order that people can procreate and fill these houses up because there is no point in that. You do these things because you believe that in the end you create a happy and a healthy nation, a society in which man finds fulfilment and you have got to have the ideological basis…

If you treat human beings just like animals, you just feed them, keep them sleek, well-exercised, healthy like dogs or cats. I don't think it will work. Nations have gone through tremendous privations and hardships in order to achieve specific goals which have inspired and fired their imagination.¹

The particular target of his opprobrium at that time was the Malay community. His perspective derived directly from his life-long practice of viewing peoples and societies

through the prism of race. According to Lee, Germans were strong, intelligent, and
driven, like the Chinese and Japanese. Indians and Italians were soft and prone to la-
ziness. Malays, like most dark-skinned races, were lazy, weak, and generally hopeless.²
He had a special affection for the British, though his regard for them as a “race” slipped
during the first decades of his adulthood, because the introduction of the welfare state
and the spread of a dependency culture had weakened them.

Lee had no intention of letting Singapore go down any of the various paths to laziness
and “ordinariness.” He envisioned creating this ideal society by pursuing a heady and
racist cocktail of eugenic improvement, cultural engineering, modernist progressivism,
and unembarrassed elitism. A little-known address that he gave to students at the
University of Singapore in December 1967 captured much of his vision for Singapore.
When the chair of the meeting asked, “What is the “X-factor” in development?” Lee replied:

Three women were brought to the Singapore General Hospital, each
in the same condition and each needing a blood transfusion. The first,
a Southeast Asian [read: Malay], was given the transfusion but died
a few hours later. The second, a South Asian [read: Indian], was also
given a transfusion but died a few days later. The third, an East Asian
[read: Chinese], was given a transfusion and survived. That is the “X-
factor” in development.³

In later life, he liked to identify the sources of his inspiration as being primarily Chi-
nese or Confucian in origin, and we should concede that such elements did play their
roles. Certainly, his penchant for trusting and privileging his own family as well as
fellow Chinese is one of the more identifiable “Chinese” traits in his pattern of gov-
ernance. He also had a propensity for viewing society through a series of hierarchical
and personal relationships. These traits have proved to be his most basic and enduring
instincts. Yet beyond his impulse to consanguinity, the wellspring of his philosophy was
thoroughly Western: colonial-inspired racism, confidence in progress through science,
faith in social engineering taught by the Cambridge Law School, and an elitism which
was imbibed in Singapore’s most elitist colonial secondary school and then reinforced
at Cambridge. To this, we can add the drive of his personal demons: the fear of failing
to live up to the destiny that he knew, in his heart of hearts, was his desert.

He grew up a man driven, pragmatic, and utterly free of moral inhibitions. If he had
been unintelligent, a stutterer, or a member of a social class that had no opportunity to
exercise leadership, he may not have had much impact on the world. But he was intel-
ligent and a magnificent communicator. He came of age as a member of a privileged
class at the tail-end of a colonial period—an interregnum of revolutionary change, new
directions and, ultimately, a new nation. The success of his quest to become leader of

² Barr, Lee Kuan Yew, Chapter 6; Han Fook Kwang, Warren Fernandez and Sumiko Tan, Lee Kuan
³ Barr, Lee Kuan Yew, 185.
the newly emerging polity was far from automatic, but given his personal attributes, it should not have been—and, in fact, was not—a surprise to anyone.

CEO of Singapore Inc.

Lee formally entered public life in 1954 at the age of thirty-one, when he was elected to a seat in the colonial Legislative Assembly. He became prime minister of the Colony of Singapore in 1959. He died in 2015, no longer prime minister, but still representing the same constituency in the Parliament of Singapore. Over those sixty-nine years, and especially in the three decades from circa 1970 to circa 2000—when he was at the top of his game—Lee crafted the tiny nation of Singapore to be something akin to his vision of an ideal society. In doing so, he both adopted and discarded ideas and values according to their usefulness. Thus, Lee moved seamlessly from being a socialist in the 1940s and 1950s to a capitalist; from a democrat when he was in opposition in Singapore and Malaysia to an autocrat after he found himself running independent Singapore; from being anti-American in the 1950s and early-to-mid-1960s to being a favorite adopted son of the Harvard University Kennedy School establishment in the 1970s and thereafter; from leading the rhetorical fight against Western “decadence” for most of his life to upholding the legitimacy of homosexuality in his old age. Lee was very adept at cherry-picking convenient and peripherally important ideas and values, usually for short-term gain. When it came to his core vision, though, he was relentless and ruthless.

But if he was so thoroughly utilitarian in choosing his causes, what can be identified as his truly “core” values? Ultimately, nothing was absolutely “core” beyond the perpetuation of his and his family’s rule. Without being quite so strict in our delineation of his “core” interests, however, we can still point to the elements that stayed with him consistently throughout his life: elitism, Chinese supremacism, and a drive for progress and success. We might add that so strong was his need to be in control of the levers of power that the state was, at all times, his favored vehicle for delivering progress. This is not a minor point, since one of his greatest achievements (and most likely one of his most enduring legacies) was his use of the state as an effective vehicle for capitalist success and social change.

Nowhere else in the world has the state been so successfully deployed as an investment and management vehicle as it has been in Lee’s Singapore. It was fortunate that Lee found himself in charge of a micro-state and not a giant nation like China—a point that severely limits the “Singapore model” of development as a template for other states to emulate. After initially operating through companies and statutory boards fully owned and directly managed by government ministries, the government settled

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on its preferred model: the government-linked company (GLC). A GLC would be at least partially government-owned, usually given preferential treatment in domestic markets, and always imbued with enough independence to act like a business in day-to-day affairs, but with more than enough government control to make it a reliable instrument of the state.

Perhaps Lee’s greatest legacy will prove to be the extraordinarily high regard he engendered throughout both Singapore’s elite and society for professional management. He succeeded where generations of communists, socialists, corporatists, and fascists had failed before him in using the state to successfully manage businesses. He was not the absolute first to do this, and he certainly did not do it on his own. Both post-war Japan and South Korea provided something of a model, but neither could boast the directness of Singapore’s model of government-in-business, whereby “Singapore Inc.” operated through direct government ownership (or part-ownership), and overarching but indirect government management of most of Singapore’s domestic economy and foreign investment. By contrast, “Japan Inc.” and “Korea Inc.” worked through pre-existing private-and-family business entities.

Even within the Singapore experiment, Lee was very much the political facilitator for the real managers and fixers: men like his first two ministers for finance, Goh Keng Swee and Hon Sui Sen. By its nature, his methodology entailed surrendering real managerial power to trusted subordinates like S. Dhanabalan and J.Y. Pillay. Goh Keng Swee, in particular, deserves to be singled out as the architect of Singapore’s early “bulldoze-and-build” model of export-oriented industrialization, whereby tracts of land (especially in the west of the main island and on the smaller southern islands) were flattened to make way for factories and, eventually, oil refineries purpose-built for multinational companies. This project was Goh’s main focus throughout most of the 1960s, and with it he laid the foundation for Singapore’s rapid economic development in the following decades. In the years following independence, Goh also built the Singapore Armed Forces from the ground up and, in the late 1970s, Goh played a pivotal role in developing central aspects of Singapore’s primary and secondary school systems. Yet, power never drifted very far from Lee’s personal hands or those of his eldest son, Lee Hsien Loong, especially after the mid-1980s when his own personal standing was at its highest, and virtually all of his peers from the 1960s had either stepped down or been pushed out.

Eventually, the logic of keeping management at notional arm’s length reached its logical conclusion when the government consolidated its GLCs into two major sovereign wealth funds (which were among the first such entities in the world): Temasek Holdings, designed to house Singapore-based companies, and the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation (GIC), which was intended for direct off-shore investments. Neither were allowed to drift out of the Lee family’s orbit: both Temasek and the GIC had members of the Lee family firmly embedded at the most senior levels of management. Lee Kuan Yew himself, supported by his son, was the GIC’s chairman. Lee Hsien Loong’s wife, Ho Ching, was the chief executive officer of Temasek Holdings and his first cousin, Kwa Chong Seng, was the deputy
Authoritarianism as a Model

The size and ubiquity of the government’s role in business and society mean that the government has dealt itself a powerful hand in handling domestic politics, thereby setting up a virtuous cycle (at least virtuous for those in power) whereby the economic and political arms of the state support each other in mutual embrace.

In this, Lee has left the twenty-first century a separate, but closely-related legacy: the legitimation of authoritarian rule. The particular form of authoritarianism practiced in Singapore includes legitimation by clean but unfree and unfair elections whereby limited electoral contestation keeps government responsive to public opinion without actually putting the regime at risk of being toppled through the ballot box. Lee built his form of authoritarianism around a system of responsive and responsible government that represented the electorate’s interests without allowing the uncertainties and untidiness of democracy and political contestation—or, for that matter, universal access to legal rights and freedoms—to intrude on the serious business of government. Yet this detail has not stopped more thoroughly authoritarian regimes from watching Singapore for lessons about governance. Indeed, Lee has demonstrated how, at least in a micro-state, authoritarianism can deliver good government (or at least better than most alternatives), high levels of prosperity, and both domestic and international political legitimacy. Achieving this was not a simple task. Over the last ten years, the project has come perilously close to coming undone—thanks to the more limited level of administrative and political competence displayed by his successors, including his son, current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. And yet the 10 percent swing to the government in the 2015 elections—taking the share of the vote for the People's Action Party up to 70 percent—shows that the system has survived with flying colors.

The election was the first held since a massive swing against the government in the 2011 elections and the first since Lee Kuan Yew’s death in March 2015. Its outcome showed that the overwhelming majority of Singaporeans—including, it seems, the

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the internet generation—have embraced authoritarian government as their security blanket. As Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong explained on the night of his election victory:

We have a new generation with better education, with access to social media, who expect their views to be heard and given more weight. … [The election result] shows that the young people understand what is at stake, support what we are doing.  

I would interpret his point somewhat differently. As much as they might grumble about the government, complain about its many failings, and enjoy poking fun at it, young, educated, and well-travelled Singaporeans could not endure the thought that Singapore might have to manage without the security and confidence that comes with the Lee Kuan Yew-brand of managerialism. Furthermore, it is now clear that Lee Hsien Loong has at last been accepted as the standard bearer for his father’s “brand,” and will be able to keep the family at the center of the Singapore story for some time to come.

Lee Kuan Yew’s legacy in Singapore is seemingly safe for another generation, and probably longer if the current and next cohort of elites can recalibrate their education, recruitment, and training procedures to pull themselves out of the culture of entitlement and mediocrity that has put the system at risk over the last decade. Since the 1980s, admission into Cabinet has been treated as the professional extension of a high-flying career in the civil service, the military, government-linked companies, or—very occasionally—in the private sector. Candidates earmarked for Cabinet are recruited into politics using a model of corporate headhunting, testing, and training borrowed originally from Shell Oil in the 1980s, and subjected to perpetual improvement thereafter.

Today, the model is very nearly cradle-to-grave, with successful candidates following an inexorable path through elite kindergartens, schools, and universities into government service and politics. Explicit in this model was an assumption that constituency politics will not get in the way of Cabinet candidates being appointed or rewarded. During the 1980s and 1990s, Lee Kuan Yew’s political intelligence and experience could be relied upon to take care of the politics, but in the long-term this comfort blanket bred complacency as new generations of “leaders” rose to peak political roles without ever having engaged in real political contestation. Such complacency died in the 2011 general election—even before Lee Kuan Yew’s death—when two sitting cabinet ministers and a new candidate for Cabinet were rejected by the voters. There is clearly a new realization in the Prime Minister’s Office that politics per se needs to be taken seriously, but how the People’s Action Party can do this without tearing down the cradle-to-grave system of elite regeneration has yet to be answered.

12 Barr, The Ruling Elite of Singapore, 86-87.
Nonetheless, the victory of authoritarianism in Singapore to date has profound implications for the prospects of authoritarian rule more generally, especially for those states that have been identified by John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge in *Foreign Affairs* magazine as practicing “modernizing authoritarianism” (of which Singapore is the listed as the prime example, and China as the second).13

Long before his death, Lee had already presided over the marriage of authoritarian rule and capitalism. In Western capitalist societies, politicians routinely say they want government to be an ally of business and the middle class, but Lee’s brilliance was to turn business and the middle class (and the working class, for that matter) into undemanding government allies. In the aftermath of Lee’s death, his successors have now confirmed that adherence to the outward forms of electoral democracy can facilitate such a union in the long term. Indeed, they have shown that the demands imposed by the use of democratic forms can keep ruling elites responsive and alert. This is indeed a legacy of which Lee would have been proud.

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**Michael D. Barr** received his Ph.D. in History from the University of Queensland in 1998 and is now Associate Professor of International Relations in the School of History of International Relations, Flinders University, Australia. He has edited and written several books on Singapore politics and history, beginning with the book of his dissertation, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Beliefs Behind the Man* (Georgetown University Press, 2000). He is currently Editor-in-Chief of Asian Studies Review and is writing a new history of Singapore.

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