



I recently watched Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's incumbent "Minister Mentor", as he was interviewed by Charlie Rose on [Bloomberg Television](#). Lee is 88 years old, he is still very alert and still very able. He stands as testimony to one of my early theories on the utility of management through mentor-ship. Lee commented to Rose that he had lived long but he had not forgotten his mistakes. I wonder how many of our current or even past political leaders are ready to admit that they had made any? Lee recognized that Singapore's development was fragile and could easily slip away if not carefully managed, but he seemed satisfied with his accomplishments. He was concerned, he said, with the impact he had on the world around him, and the people who had relied on him, and he hoped that he had made their lives better. In his own assessment of his accomplishments and achievements, he said "I give myself a B+." Many would beg to differ. By any standard, Lee Kuan Yew's life-time accomplishments are A+.

I have been told many stories of Lee Kuan Yew making references to his visit to Jamaica and the impact that has had on him. One story, which I have discounted, is that the Singapore model was developed by him based on the Jamaican experience. There is nothing to suggest to me that there is any truth in that story. There was nothing particularly unique about the Jamaican experience when Lee visited the country. Nevertheless, in his biography, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story*, Lee had commented on the incongruity of the luxury hotels and the poverty and insecurity that characterized the lives of the ordinary people in the streets of Jamaica. It is significant that the two Jamaicas, and the implications that had for the future instability and underdevelopment of the country, should have been so easily discerned by him. If there was any lesson the Lee learned from his Jamaican experience, it must have been what to avoid. On the other hand, I recall Gordon Wells, who was then Cabinet Secretary, telling me the story that during Lee's visit another dignitary commented to Lee on how beautiful Jamaica was and how pleasant was their sojourn on the North Coast. To this Lee replied, "Yes it is but tomorrow we return to reality in Kingston." That story is far more plausible.

During the interview Lee explained his insistence that English become the official first language of Singapore. He was insistent that his country could not have developed and participated in the

world economy if it had chosen to rely on its local third world patois. He clearly accepted that standard English, and not "Singlish", was important to both notional unity and development. And then, to my great surprise, he referred to his visit to Jamaica. This is some 40 years later, and the experience then is still fresh in his mind as evidence of what a country should not do. Lee described leaving his hotel to go and the beach to speak to the fishermen. He recounted a conversation with one when he asked what fish had the fisherman caught and that he could not readily understand what he was told in the Jamaican dialect. Eventually, he intuited that the word he could not readily understand was "Sprat." What was significant to me was that he used this experience to justify his attitude, and Singapore's approach, to Standard English. There is much to be said for this approach and maybe it is time for us to learn something from Lee Kuan Yew and from Singapore.

[Videos of the interview can be accessed on the VR-Zone site.](#)