In December 1984, I observed that the study of public policy in Singapore was still in its infancy. Research on the public policies implemented by the People’s Action Party (PAP) government since its assumption of power in June 1959 had not kept pace with the increase in such policies (Quah, 1984: p. 108). Since space limitations do not permit a comprehensive review of the literature on policy studies in Singapore during the past four decades of PAP rule, the aim of this article is more modest: to identify five emerging trends in policy studies in Singapore.

(1) INCREASING RELIANCE ON POLICY RESEARCH BY THE PAP GOVERNMENT

The first trend in policy studies in Singapore is the increasing reliance on policy research by the PAP government since the 1980s. During its first two decades in power, the PAP government devoted its energies to solving the two major problems it inherited when it assumed office: the housing shortage and growing unemployment. Accordingly, the Housing and Development Board (HDB) was created in February 1960 to implement the government’s low cost public housing program. Similarly, the Economic Development Board (EDB) was formed in August 1961 to promote economic development by encouraging foreign investment to Singapore. The HDB’s success in public housing and the EDB’s ability to attract foreign investment to Singapore enabled the PAP government to solve the housing shortage and the unemployment problem. The PAP government’s ability to deliver the goods during the 1960s and 1970s ensured its reelection in the 1963, 1968, 1972, 1976, and 1980 general elections.

Since the PAP government’s main concern during its first 20 years in power was to fulfill its electoral promises and to ensure its political survival, it was not concerned with the consequences of the various public policies implemented. However, the situation in the 1980s
was different—Singapore was a success story envied by other developing countries. By 1980, the HDB had provided public housing for 68 percent of Singapore’s total population. Furthermore, Singapore’s rapid economic growth from 1960 to 1980 can be attributed to the creation of the statutory boards that have accelerated the developmental process.

In addition to Singapore’s improved socioeconomic situation during the 1980s, the results of the December 1984 general election demonstrated that many voters wanted a change in the leadership style and substance of some public policies. Thus, even though the PAP captured 77 of the 79 parliamentary seats and won 62.9 percent of the total votes, there was a significant decline of 12.6 percent in votes for the PAP. The PAP government responded to the electorate’s call for more consultation and participation in the public policy-making process by creating a Feedback Unit in March 1985 and launching “A National Agenda” in February 1987. Given the unpopularity of the controversial Graduate Mothers Scheme—the policy of giving preference to primary school registration for children of graduate mothers—in 1984, the PAP government began to be concerned with the consequences of the policies it had introduced during its 25 years in office.

In August 1987, the Ministry of Community Development commissioned a research team from the National University of Singapore to conduct research on religion and religious revivalism in Singapore. The research project was completed in a year and resulted in six reports. These reports provided the PAP government with useful information on the religions and religious practices of Singaporeans for the preparation of its White Paper on Maintenance of Religious Harmony, presented to Parliament by the President on December 26, 1989. More importantly, the scholars’ recommendation for the establishment of an Inter-Religious Council was accepted by the PAP government, which indicated in the White Paper that it would “establish a Presidential Council for Religious Harmony” to moderate relations between religious groups and to advise it on “how best to deal with sensitive religious issues.” The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill was introduced in Parliament for its first reading on January 15, 1990. It was read for a second time on February 22, and sent to a Select Committee on February 24 after a two-day debate in Parliament. The bill was finally passed in Parliament on November 9, 1990.

(2) Emphasis on Policy Evaluation by Government Ministries

Concomitant with the PAP government’s reliance on policy research in the 1980s is the second trend of emphasizing policy evaluation by government ministries. The Singapore Police Force (SPF) was the first government agency in Singapore to introduce policy evaluation when it conducted a “before and after” study of the Neighbourhood Police Posts (NPPs) implemented in B Division in 1983 and 1984. A random sample of 543 residents in B Division were interviewed between March and May 1983 to ascertain their attitudes toward the police before the setting up of the NPPs. A year later, 383 of these residents were interviewed again to ascertain whether the NPPs had any impact on their attitudes toward the

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1. See Quah (1989a); Kuo (1989); Kuo and Quah (1989); Tong (1989a); Tong (1989b); and Kuo, Quah and Tong (1989).
The two surveys showed that the residents in B Division had a positive orientation toward the police as a result of the introduction of the NPPs. Indeed, the effectiveness of the NPPs in B Division in improving the relations between its residents and the police resulted in the SPF’s decision to extend the NPP system throughout the city-state (Quah and Quah, 1987). There are now 91 NPPs in Singapore.

A second example of the increasing reliance on policy evaluation is demonstrated by the Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA), which has relied on both informal and formal surveys to assess the effectiveness of the annual “Courtesy” and “Speak Mandarin” campaigns. Informal surveys consist of feedback and quantitative data from ministries, statutory boards, and private sector organizations on their in-house campaigns. A major formal survey is conducted by a professional agency for MITA every alternate year. For the Speak Mandarin Campaign, MITA also relies on surveys of students by the Ministry of Education and surveys of hawkers by the Ministry of the Environment.

(3) PROLIFERATION OF RESEARCH DEPARTMENTS IN THE MINISTRIES

Eleven of the ministries in Singapore have research units or departments. Only the Prime Minister’s Office, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Law have no research departments. The Ministry of Home Affairs has the most research units; in addition to its research division, the SPF has two research units, and the Prisons Department and the Central Narcotics Bureau each have a research unit. The Ministry of Education has a Research and Testing Division, which consists of an Examination
Branch, a Research and Evaluation Branch, and a Testing and Assessment Branch. The other nine ministries each have a research department or unit.

This third trend of the proliferation of research departments in the ministries is not surprising as it is related to the first two trends. While the research departments of the ministries collect relevant data for their specific needs, the Department of Statistics in the Ministry of Trade and Industry provides all ministries with macroeconomic and other national data, including the Yearbook of Statistics Singapore and the Singapore Yearbook of Labour Statistics.

(4) Most Policy Research Is Conducted By Local Scholars

With the increase in the number of local social scientists in Singapore, it is not surprising that they have also taken over the initiative in conducting policy research on local topics from the foreign researchers. This means that the bulk of policy research in Singapore is being undertaken by local scholars. This is a healthy trend because it shows that Singaporeans can do their own policy research and no longer need to rely on the “safari” type of research conducted by foreign scholars.

Local scholars have the edge over foreign researchers in two respects. First, it is relatively easier for local researchers to gain access to government agencies or other local organizations to obtain the relevant empirical data. The second advantage of local scholars is that they are more familiar with the Singapore milieu and will be able to evaluate and interpret their research findings according to the values of their own society and not those of other societies.

(5) Increasing International Interest In The Transferability Of Singapore’s Policies

In 1960 Singapore was a poor country: its per capita gross national product (GNP) was US$443. However, in 1997, its per capita GNP reached US$32,940—it was ranked the fourth-richest country in the world after Switzerland, Japan, and Norway (World Bank, 1999: p. 191).

Singapore’s rapid economic growth and success in solving such problems as public housing, traffic congestion, crime, and corruption have attracted worldwide attention. Indeed, many political leaders have visited Singapore to ascertain the reasons for its success and to consider the transferability of Singapore’s policies to their own countries.

For example, after his first visit to Singapore in 1978, Deng Xiaoping indicated that he “wanted to use the Lion City as a model.” Consequently, 400 delegations comprising mayors, governors, and party secretaries from China visited Singapore during the same year on study missions. The number of foreign leaders visiting Singapore during 1990-1993 increased from 48 to 231. In 1995, Singapore was ranked the second-most competitive country in the world, after the United States, and, according to The World Competitiveness Report 1995, “its record offers a blueprint for other developing countries on how to succeed.”

An important secret of Singapore’s success is its willingness to learn from the experiences of...
other countries in identifying relevant solutions for its policy problems. Usually, the selected policy solutions are not transplanted to Singapore in toto because modifications are made to suit the local context. Thus, the borrowing of policy ideas from other countries has been beneficial to Singapore since there is no blind acceptance or wholesale transplntation of foreign innovations without modification to suit the local context (J Quah, 1998: pp. 113-114).

Similarly, it is difficult to copy Singapore’s model of development in toto because of the city-state’s unique circumstances. Moreover, it is also difficult to transplant Singapore’s policies elsewhere because of the high costs involved in paying civil servants high salaries, investing heavily in education, and providing public housing for 86 percent of the population. Nor is it easy to minimize corruption, introduce meritocracy, reject welfare policies, and adopt comprehensive measures to curb crime without a government that enjoys widespread political support. Thus, Singapore’s policies are not transferable to other countries because of the differences between Singapore and these countries. Nevertheless, these countries can emulate and adapt some aspects of Singapore’s policies to suit their own needs, provided that their political leaders, civil servants, and the population are prepared to make the required changes.

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References


