

Welcome to my blog posts from partlycloudy.co.uk, the travel journal I wrote when living in Singapore from 2012-2017. Not wanting to do away with website content, I've made PDFs of some of the posts and uploaded them here, to keep the adventures alive.

## A mark of respect

March 29 2015

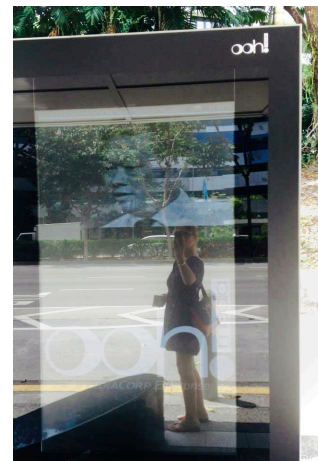
Today I attended a funeral, my first since arriving on this island some 31 months ago. As Dad was in town he came along too, and so did my husband and son. We didn't know the deceased but we felt welcome, as did everyone else in the city. For this was the country-wide funeral procession of Mr Lee Kuan Yew, ex-PM of Singapore and founding father of Singapore back in 1965.

Side note: whether or not you're here in Singapore in 2015, as we are, you will probably have heard of LKY, as news of his passing has made global headlines. What a time to be living here and what a time for my dad – social anthropologist, cultural scientist – to be visiting. And what a day for a funeral, grey and rainy. We Cornish think this is perfect funeral weather, proper job.

Since Lee Kuan Yew's death last Monday at 3.18am, many 'visitors' like us have been looking for reactions to the events playing out in this powerhouse of a city. Preparations for Singapore's 50th National Day (birthday party) in August have ground to a temporary and reverential halt as it absorbs the fact that its founding father will not be in attendance. As the week has worn on, so the queue for Parliament House has grown, more and more people waiting in line to show unanimous respect.

I collect newspaper front covers from world events, and so I made sure to pick up a copy of *Time Magazine*, plus a great shot of the viewing queue from the *Straits Times*. But I don't just want to look at the pictures, I'm searching for clues as to how to react, ways to pay my respects. What should we be doing, or saying?

I have been signing off emails to local businesses and acquaintances with a brief note of condolence, and getting muted thanks back. Grandpa and SmallMonkey wrote in a book of condolence at school, which, to its credit, took the news seriously enough to cancel all end-of-term celebration assemblies. The school has involved the children in discussions about LKY – SM came home last Monday reciting his name, birth, rank and funeral date. It has lowered the school flags to half-mast. News stories are showing temples adorned with black and white pictures, white flowers at the door. There are rolling clips on Media Corps screens at bus stops (see pic, right), showing vignettes of the man's life. Critics have denounced this decision as yet another example of the nation being told what to think. I see it as a curio, worth reporting.



In fact, there are varied reactions if you look for them. One blogger posts a poignant piece about how she was in a cab when news of LKY's death came over the radio,

announced bravely by his own son and current PM Lee Hsien Loong. The cab driver turned up the volume and wiped away tears. Yet personal opinions of The Man have peppered social media feeds all week, both good and not-so-good. If one FB page gave a heartfelt personal eulogy, another posted a cynical note about chewing gum.

If one raised questions about Mr Lee's style of governing, another talked about how hard it was to stand in the viewing queue for eight hours in 37c with no hint of a breeze, and reminded us why so many people were doing this. One of my most overused sayings is that no one likes a success story, and never has this been more evident than in some of the reviews bandied about this past week. They come from near and far, on and off the island, but beside every critic is someone who understands what it's like to lose a parent. If I had to weigh up the most prominent opinion over the past few days, the arrow would point towards the latter.

So how to soak up the intense flavours of this week while paying respects? It feels a bit like being a house guest when the host is suddenly unwell. Do you put the kettle on, or gather your things and call a cab? By now you will have realised that I'm not clever or political enough to give a proper balanced opinion on the life and works of Mr Lee. I enjoy and appreciate life in the city LKY built and I won't live anywhere like it again. I recognise what its faults are but after a day like today, I prefer not to dwell on them. I apologise if I have overlooked an aspect of your own life or inheritance that has suffered as a result of his work, and I'm also sorry if I'm speaking out of turn to one of his fans. I am writing this as witness, without opinion, if that is possible.

The last time I witnessed a public funeral was at Princess Diana's procession in 1997. We ran to a spot on London's north circular, arriving in time to see the departing cortege, flowers thrown in silence apart from the odd muted sob, sizzling tires rushing past on wet tarmac on a damp day not unlike this one. It was a very different feeling. The car was going faster, the rain was colder, and pretty much no one on that pavement would have been directly affected by the Princess. Plus her death was a rather more complicated affair, so it was all a bit of a downer, to be honest.

Today's crowds were almost upbeat, unanimously respectful even in the midst of the downpour – even more so. We wore the regulation mourning code of black and white under our plastic rain macs (that's us in the pic, right, snapped by Dad), then trudged to a waiting spot 10 minutes from our condo. A guard shouted through a loud-hailer, warning crowds that the cortege was about to pass. "I couldn't hear him," said Dad, afterwards, "what did he say?". The man had shouted: "We are all here for the same reason. The procession is about to pass, so please take care, stay well back, pay your respects to Mr Lee in the way he would have wanted."



Everyone did just that, and a cheer went up as the stately car processed along. And although you might say this crowd culture is exactly what some of the cynics are

critical of, today I saw it as a group of people working together. Afterwards a lot of us shoehorned into the shelter of the local hawkers for *kopi*, watching TVs bolted high on to the walls next to fans blasting through steamy heat. We got coffee to go, walked back home through the rain, privileged to have seen it up close. Then we spent the next two and a half hours watching the 10 eulogies on our own telly at home.

I know there were some who opted out of the seven-day mourning period, did not wear black and white or join the queue, were vocal in their defence, irritated by the outpouring of grief for a man that not everyone loved. Perhaps I am justifying my own need to show mourning. I'm not really sure. My longest-standing friend has always talked about the privilege she felt at being present when her mother died. A few years later my husband was in the same situation, and later still I joined that club. It's not one we ever wanted to be part of, but one in which we are all nothing short of grateful to say we were there. What I'm trying to convey (in a post that is almost as long as today's exquisite eulogies) is that death deserves a modicum of respect, and if we get a chance to pay it, and it's fitting to do so, then we should always try.

"If you seek his monument," said LKY's son Lee Hsien Loong in his eulogy, "look around you". When I consider my own privilege I think of Dad, who has always said: "I've led a charmed life." So have I. Today I gave thanks for that, and for the city I'm enjoying, which I will continue to enjoy until we leave. Same goes for life in general.

#### Nine years later

Editing this in March 2024 for publication on my other website, I must admit to sounding a bit pious. Who was I to say how to feel when I was only borrowing the country for five years? I have no experience of having lived under the planned ownership of LKY's heritage. What I did have the good sense to do, back then, was to find links that gave better summations than I could, from those in the know: Here's [one piece](#) from *The Business Times*. And [here's another](#) from *The Indie*.