

Libertarianism and the Development of the Underclass

By

Mohd Irwan Mohd Taib

*I*n his 2002 National Day Rally speech, the then Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr. Goh Chok Tong mentioned that “we must reverse this changing attitude towards public assistance. Singaporeans have to pick themselves up when they fall, and not expect the Government to come to their aid. They have to be more self-reliant.”

Four years later, whilst responding to the growing concern on income disparities PM Goh, in his parliamentary speech said “one seductive argument on how to tackle this is that we should go for welfare. It is not a new argument. It is not a brainwave which has just struck somebody since the election. It is an old argument which other countries have had and which we have to know about and deal with. We have treated welfare as a dirty word.”

He then continued by proposing a social model that emphasises on three things:

“Firstly, enterprise and drive to create wealth, rather than merely redistributing a smaller pie; secondly, self-reliance rather than welfare; and, thirdly, saving for ourselves and spending within our means rather than taxing for others and borrowing from the future. So in this way, we can get the people to perform to the best of their abilities; we can keep our economy competitive and flexible; and we can attract more investments and more talent, and improve the lives for all Singaporeans.”

To be fair, the state has also been generous in helping Singaporeans when times are hard and when there is surplus to share, which I call “quiet welfare”. For example, the

Economic Restructuring Shares, Medisave Top-ups, Progress Package and recently, the Workfare Bonus and GST offset package. However, is this enough to assist the lower class Singaporeans especially those earning less than \$1,000 a month?

As much as we want to help the lower-income community, we should avoid taking the approach of libertarianism in reluctantly assisting the underclass citizens.

The term 'libertarianism' was first introduced by thinkers like John Locke and Ludwig von Mises who saw themselves as continuing the classical liberal tradition of the previous century. By that time, the term liberalism had come to refer, within the United States, to belief in moderate government regulation of the economy and redistribution of wealth. These thinkers therefore called themselves libertarians, and from the United States, the term spread to the rest of the world. The fundamental values that libertarians fight for are individual liberty, individual responsibility and individual property. Libertarians have an elaborate theory of these values that they defend, that does not always match the 'common sense' regarding liberty, and that strictly opposes collectivist views in this regard.

Poverty and the underprivileged in Singapore has always been a social, political, and to a certain extent, a community issue. Some would say that it is not their moral duty as social human beings to take care of those less fortunate than themselves to the best of their ability. These types of people have what is called a "libertarian" viewpoint. There isn't a specific definition of "libertarian", but one may consider libertarianism as "justice with liberty; liberty with the absence of interference by other persons." In relation to the matter at hand, in many developed countries like United States and Britain, libertarians are against taxing the affluent or forcing people to aid the starving and poor. Libertarianism is a political philosophy maintaining that all persons are the absolute owners of their own lives, and should be free to do whatever they wish with their possessions or property, provided they allow others the same liberty and avoid abusing their liberty. Libertarians favour an ethic of self-responsibility and strongly oppose conscription and obligation of charity services, because they believe coercing someone to provide charity service is ethically wrong.

A libertarian, Robert Nozick, noted in his book, *Anarchy, State & Utopia* (1974) that everyone has “Lockean rights”, which require refraining from interfering with the others. They also have no obligation to do anything positive for anyone else, and likewise, they have no obligation towards others. These rights forbid them from interfering with a person’s liberty even if it would promote general good, or prevent another’s rights from being violated. Overall, the general idea is that people have the liberty to live a life free from intervention of others, and can lead their life however they so choose. In addition, Nozick says that if a person acquired his fortune or possessions without harming, defrauding, or violating the rights of any others, then it is morally permissible to use those things however one wishes. This includes wasting, willing, or endowing the possessions to someone else. Even though many people are suffering from poverty and underclass discrimination, Nozick’s theory of justice states there is no obligations to help these people. The previous premise comes to form Nozick’s “entitlement theory.” Relating to poverty, libertarians feel that no matter how the actual distribution of economic holdings may look, if all involved are entitled to the holdings they possess, the distribution is just.

This theory however is dangerously towing us into being detached from a society. In addition, it is more detrimental when libertarians hold political office or community leadership in the social service sector propagating the rhetoric of improving the social situation or economic situation of the underclass. The idea that the economy would have to be tweaked in order to elevate the condition of the underclass would involve violating someone’s liberty, and therefore would make it morally unacceptable to the libertarians. For example, libertarian statesmen would formulate policies that are against directly providing the poor with welfare programmes, food stamps, subsidised housing and education, and popular policies benefitting the poor, because such programmes are in direct contrast with their beliefs about liberty and how the poor should make their own effort in improving their present condition.

William Ryan, in his book entitled *Blaming the Victim* (1976), wrote of how people on welfare were regularly characterised as being lazy or ignorant and their sorry conditions were their fault. In some cases, the poor were even seen as the “bad apples” in a developed country and the leadership blames the poor themselves for their condition. Likewise for the

bodies that look into the welfare of the underprivileged. It is best if these bodies can first understand the core reason for the existence of poverty in the society and devise a preventive programme rather than a prescriptive one.

The ideal focus of a country should consist of anti-poverty agenda driven by the policymakers. The political leadership should develop the society holistically by not creating significant gap between the rich and the poor and evading obtrusive representation of a particular community in the underclass. Viewing from a pluralistic angle, Ryan believes in integration of society. Integration is the corner-stone of the “Blaming the Victim” analysis: white and black, rich and poor share the same values and interests, the same culture, the same morality; they want the same things. The only thing that separates them is power and money. Ryan also asserts that the “victim blamers” benefit from the action whether they know it or not; “it is important to realise that Blaming the Victim is not a process of intentional distortion although it does serve the class interests of those who practise it.”

Personally, I find the libertarian’s preference for private charity over public welfare quite disheartening. Although there are instances where public aid programmes have been, and continue to be abused, in fortitude of humanism, we have a humanitarian obligation to aid those less fortunate than ourselves. But not to the extent of spoonfeeding these people for the rest of their lives. It would be fine if the social service groups used programmes like financial assistance, subsidised education, and food stamps primarily as a method to get people back on their feet but not as a way of life. I feel that those who take a libertarian viewpoint are self-centred, selfish, and simply inhumane. To deny a human being the ability to have food, clothing, and shelter is inexcusable. Even though it may seem that some deserve it more than others, when it comes down to it, we are all the same. Some may have been fortunate enough to grow up in an environment that is financially, emotionally, and spiritually stable. Some may not. Does this mean that they should not be given the opportunity to try to make something of themselves so that they can change their respective situations?

A society that employs a libertarian point of view is one that is regressive, not progressive. In Singapore, the issues of poverty, unemployment and families struggling to

pay education fees are still real. Such families are still playing catch-up with those in the higher income class. Libertarianism offers no opportunity for advancement, and essentially is an example of a belief in the self-reliance of all people. It is sad to think that in a society as advanced as Singapore, there are still those among us who would employ such systems, if it were possible.

[This article was originally published in *Karyawan* magazine, Vol. 8, Issue. 1, December 2007.]