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HEADLINE: What the chimps might teach us about change

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BODY:

HARVARD professor Ronald Heifetz teaches leadership at the Kennedy School of Government. He used to be a medical doctor. He is said to be an accomplished cellist and is clearly proud of his Jewish heritage.

All of this was on display when he delivered a public lecture on leadership and change at the **Civil Service College** here on Thursday.

I made it a point to be there, as years ago, I had enjoyed some of his lectures at the Kennedy School. Soon afterwards, I also had the privilege of sitting in on an intense three-hour interview he conducted in Cambridge with Mr Lee Kuan Yew on his insights into leadership for a research project.

He did not disappoint. Drawing on his medical past, Prof Heifetz told his audience of civil servants, academics and journalists that change is evolutionary, just like the natural adaptation of DNA.

He had touched on this in a recent interview with Management First magazine: 'Ninety-nine per cent of a human's DNA is the same as the DNA of a chimpanzee. God didn't do zero-based budgeting when God got frustrated that chimpanzees couldn't quite carry on a conversation with (him)...

'Instead, God kept experimenting and tinkering. The resulting 1 per cent change that produced human DNA was very significant. But it required changing only about 1 per cent of a human's total genetic make-up - not 50 per cent.'

Similarly, Prof Heifetz recounted in his talk how ancient Jewish elders had met after the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD70 to figure out how to keep their heritage alive.

A critical part of the challenge was deciding what parts of Jewish cultural DNA to preserve, what to adapt and what to let go of in the new circumstances they faced as a community.

Change, in other words, is both progressive and conservative, the professor noted.

Now, what do the evolution of chimpanzees, DNA modification and Jewish history

have to do with Singapore today?

Well, put simply, the country is at a critical crossroads, facing many challenges of the sort which Prof Heifetz describes as 'adaptive'.

This refers to challenges which go beyond familiar problems which have been encountered before, where tried and tested solutions can be reached for by figures in authority.

Instead, an adaptive challenge is one which requires a society to face new circumstances, and deal with them in unfamiliar ways, perhaps even as yet unthought of ways.

It is hard work, requiring learning and unlearning, as well as those much talked about 'mindset changes', social negotiation of compromises and forging of a new consensus on key issues.

What has brought this about?

Well, the world has changed, and is changing fast. Singapore's economic formula, of being open and competitive in the world economy, welcoming foreign investors and offering value to them, has been adopted by countries all round the world.

This calls for Singaporeans to learn new ways to stay ahead if they are to survive economically.

Rapid changes in technology, greater access to the world through travel and modern communications, a better educated populace are all also driving the push for change.

Then, there is the transition to a new generation of leaders, some freshly elected in the recent general election. How are they to relate to their voters, many of whom would have grown up under wholly different circumstances from their parents and grandparents?

The new leaders will have to find their own way. They cannot simply be a collection of 'little Lee Kuan Yews', as someone put it at the forum on Thursday.

They will have to find new answers to new problems, in the same spirit of open-minded learning and pragmatic adaptation shown by Singapore's founding fathers.

Voters, too, have a major part to play. They will have to do 'adaptive work', as Prof Heifetz puts it, embracing change and helping society move forward through their own initiatives and efforts, instead of simply asking what the Government is going to do about every problem that arises.

But even as Singapore adapts and changes, it is also going to have to figure out what parts of its system of governance works, and how best to preserve it.

How is it to preserve the political stability that has underpinned the system, in the face of a growing desire for more checks and balances?

At what point do these checks become a drag on the country's ability to be politically and socially nimble, able to make policy changes without being caught up in partisan

politicking?

How to retain the country's competitive edge derived from industrial peace and social cohesion, even as income gaps widen and threaten to pull society apart?

How to foster a sense of national identity amid growing tribal pulls of race, language and religion in an increasingly inter-connected world?

These issues are not new. But grappling with them will call for much fresh thinking, some soul searching, even perhaps a degree of collective discomfort and angst.

But amid all the talk of change, perhaps more reflection is needed on the idea that the process of change should entail a discussion on what to keep, even as some things are revised and renewed.

Previous attempts to fashion such a consensus on the way forward included the Remaking Singapore Committee and the Singapore 21 committee, both of which I was a member of.

These were set up to relook policies and government processes, and recommend which sacred cows to slay, and which to keep alive.

But perhaps because of the hype, many were anticipating transformational change, and so were left somewhat disappointed.

After government leaders promised that 'no stone would be left unturned' in the policy reviews, some were quick to throw stones when several major policies were left largely unchanged even after being debated and discussed.

That was a pity, seeing as it gave rise to needless cynicism, which did little to further public discourse.

What was so sorely missing in this discussion was the wisdom of Prof Heifetz in arguing that change needs to be at once conservative even as it is progressive.

He summed it up this way in his interview: 'In biology, most of the DNA's worth keeping. That's also true in organisational and political life. It would be stupid to do radical surgery when it's unnecessary. Yet many leaders forget to remind people that a change process also involves a lot of hard thinking about what to preserve.'

'The problem is that revolutions usually fail. Evolutions, in which a dramatic innovation is grafted onto the best of the core competences of the past, have a much better chance of succeeding.'

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A CASE OF PRESERVING 'In biology, most of the DNA's worth keeping. That's also true in organisational and political life. It would be stupid to do radical surgery when it's unnecessary. Yet many leaders forget to remind people that a change process also involves a lot of hard thinking about what to preserve.'
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