

# Stupendous Singapore – not quite what some people think it is

*CIB chairman Edward Spalton explains why Singapore's economic success does not mean that the UK should abandon domestic agricultural production. No country intent on true independence would deliberately set out to make itself wholly dependent on others when it comes to feeding its population.*

The tremendous economic success of Singapore is undoubtedly a great achievement. As a result, many keen Brexiteers believe that it is a deregulated, super-Thatcherite sort of paradise, to be imitated in all respects as a model for an independent British economy – ‘Singapore-on-Thames’.

This mindset even caused a senior economic advisor to the Treasury to go right off his head. Dr Tim Leunig is reported as saying that Britain does not need its farming and fishing industries because Singapore manages to be “rich without having its own agricultural sector.”

Singapore has not got much choice in the matter because it is a very densely populated city state with very little agricultural land – something which seems to have escaped Dr Leunig's attention. The government of Singapore is aware of this and has started to incorporate roof gardens and hydroponic equipment into new housing blocks. Mandated by the government, the same land can now grow food as well as provide housing, thus reducing the need for food imports. Michael Portillo visited just such a development on one of his recent train journeys.

Dr Leunig's attitude was shared by the British Liberal government before the Great War (circa 1910) when one member of the Board of Agriculture proclaimed. “British agriculture

is dead and it is our job to provide a decent funeral.” With all the resources of Empire, the world’s largest battle fleet and biggest merchant navy to bring it, who needed home food production? That was the thinking.

In 1911, Kipling responded with his poem ‘The Big Steamers’ which ended with the lines:

*Send out your big warships to watch your big waters,  
That no-one may stop us from bringing you food,  
For the bread that you eat and the biscuits you nibble,  
The sweets that you suck and the joints that you carve,  
They are brought to you daily by all us Big Steamers,  
And if anyone hinders our coming you’ll starve.*

This poem was written for schools and set to music. What a pity its lesson is not taught today! Of course there are many sorts of risks and hindrances which can impede food supplies to a country which has thrown itself totally upon the uncertainties of the world market for all its people’s nourishment. No country intent on true independence would deliberately set out to increase those risks and that dependency.

There is much in Singapore’s economy to admire. Yet its founder, Lee Kuan Yew, admitted to being influenced by the Fabian Society, so it is hardly the Thatcherite apogee of deregulation imagined by right-wing British Brexiteers!

A quarter of the economy is industry with major shipyards and high tech firms. Some 75% of the land is owned by the Singapore Land Authority. Over one-third of Singapore’s labour force is comprised of immigrants. The government is the majority shareholder in over a third of the largest firms. The trade unions negotiate pay and conditions in the sort of way

to which Barbara Castle aspired in her paper 'In Place of Strife'. That turned out to be a Labour-in-vain here!

In short, Singapore, whilst not a state-run economy, is a very tightly state-led economy which knows where it wants to go – not a *laissez faire* free-for-all. At the same time it manages to encourage competitiveness and enterprise in a truly remarkable way. Friends who lived and worked there some years ago remarked on how pleasant, clean and well-run everything was. In a lifetime of moving around the world, it was one of their favourite postings – not least because the people were so pleasantly polite and businesslike.