



## THE BIG READ

### FIVE QUESTIONS THIS BOOK ANSWERS

1. How did the idea of governing countries evolve over time?
2. Why is managing a country so different from managing a company?
3. Why is it so hard to change the way governments work?
4. How are everyday folk using technology to solve problems in their neighbourhood?
5. Why are Singapore and Sweden better prepared for the future than the rest of the world?

# Singapore shows the world the way ahead

Singapore presents a lean, effective Asian alternative to bloated, inefficient governance, say The Economist's John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge in their new book

#### The Fourth Revolution: The Global Race To Reinvent The State

By John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge  
305 pages/Allen Lane/\$44.89 with GST  
from Books Kinokuniya or on loan from the National Library Board under the call number English 320.1 MIC



By CHEONG SUK-WAI  
SENIOR WRITER

THERE are few things as satisfying as an idea whose time has come.

For Singaporeans on the cusp of half a century of independence, that satisfaction should come from knowing that everyone else now wants to learn their style of government for a better future, say The Economist's John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge.

That model, as they outline beautifully in their new book *The Fourth Revolution*, is about having a bright and technologically as-



### Just a minute

## THE GOOD



■ John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge have given readers a big-picture primer on the state of the world today, with vivid and absorbing insights, particularly on China. For example, they juxtapose the challenges and achievements of two innovative civil servants in China, Ma Hong and Yang Jiachang, who work just around the corner from each other. Ma is shown to use devious strategies to close down pesky non-governmental organisations to great effect, while Yang seems less effective, despite sticking his neck out in 2005 to field complaints from the citizenry. Their many other descriptions of how China works today makes their book a great primer on how the Asian giant is coping with sudden riches, slower growth and the greatest country-to-city migration in history.

■ Their analysis of why governments are prone to bloating, and are so difficult to change, is thorough, incisive and balanced. As they note in Chapter Eight: "Governments are very different entities from private companies – and citizens are very different creatures from consumers."

■ They are also particularly good in showing readers what is possible in reforming government. This includes paying taxes by SMS in Denmark or websites in Britain and Boston on which citizens can post photographs about leaky pipes or road potholes to alert the authorities to fix them.

■ Singaporeans will find much to reflect on in the book, which is an even-handed perspective on their country, albeit one with a few side-swipes,



the corps of enterprisers govern a country efficiently and productively – all on the leanest of budgets. In all, governing Singapore chews up only about 17 per cent of its gross domestic product, less than the 25 per cent limit proposed by British economist John Maynard Keynes, they add, calling the Singapore model “the Asian alternative” to the largely bloated, bumbling and bribe-happy governments elsewhere.

Crediting founding father Lee Kuan Yew as its creator, the authors laud his style as “tough love” which is “elitist and stingy”, resulting in the greatest economic “miracle” of the past 70 years. That, the authors argue, had a lot to do with his insistence on self-reliance, in the form of the Central Provident Fund where 90 per cent of what you get depends on what you put in, instead of social assistance, which he considers an “all-you-can-eat” buffet, as practised most notably in welfare state Scandinavia.

Most significantly, they stress, China is learning all it can about Singapore-style governing. So, they note, while some may scoff at the city-state’s ban on chewing gum and treating its citizens “like children”, its mix of state-directed capitalism and city planning is being copied on a grand scale by China.

Micklethwait is *The Economist*’s editor-in-chief, while Wooldridge is currently its management editor, writing the superb column Schumpeter on workplace concerns. They interviewed Mr Lee for this book in 2011, and devote Chapter 6 of their nine-chapter book to the Republic.

This book, their sixth outing together, focuses on what they call the coming “fourth revolution” in governance, claiming that this revolution, iconised by their Asian al-

Singapore, as created by Mr Lee Kuan Yew, say the authors, “is two parts Hobbes, one part Mill, with a dash of Asian values”. However, they stop short of calling its governing style “ideal” as their vision of the fourth revolution is of a model in which citizens are freer to express themselves and innovate. PHOTO: POH LYE KIAT

## The Big Read Meet: Aug 27

IN HER new book *The Sixth Extinction*, journalist Elizabeth Kolbert shows how people’s many activities are killing off most of the earth’s flora and fauna.

Some scientists have pointed out that the situation is now so bad that the only way to save most species is if humans themselves became extinct.

What do you think? Join

senior writer Cheong Suk-Wai to discuss the biggest problem of existence on Wednesday, Aug 27, from 6.30pm at The Big Read Meet.

The Meet will be held at the Central Public Library in B1 of the National Library Board headquarters, 100 Victoria Street. To register, e-mail your name, NRIC and contact numbers and occupation to [readsingapore@nlb.gov.sg](mailto:readsingapore@nlb.gov.sg)

ternative, will be bigger than even communism.

This fourth revolution is nigh, they argue, because most people have grown contemptuous of those who lead their countries. The authors say this is largely because the free-wheeling Western version of democracy has led to increasingly demanding electorates which massive, clunky government machinery fails to serve well.

The first 3½ revolutions in governance then, they argue, began in 1651 when Briton Thomas Hobbes published his tract *Leviathan*. In it, Hobbes proposed a social contract between rulers and the ruled, in which citizens would let rulers restrain some of their rights in return for protection. This gave sovereigns reason to build a bureaucracy to help them govern, transforming their fiefdoms into nation states.

The nation state was the dominant form of political control until The Enlightenment of the 18th century and the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century. Western

thinkers in these two centuries unleashed the second revolution, arguing for greater personal liberty and smaller government. Chief among them were Briton John Stuart Mill, and his father James, who championed keeping the state out of most people’s affairs as much as possible. Their views gained traction as they were buoyed by the growth of free trade and industry globally.

The 20th century, however, brought a backlash against such free-spiritedness, the authors note, as most people came to believe that it led to lots of physical and social diseases. This led to the third revolution in governance, when husband and wife Sidney and Beatrice Webb gave the world their blueprint for the welfare state, in which governments intervened in almost every facet of a person’s life, especially in education and health care. Big government did not get bigger than this, and the Webbs’ welfare state was embraced most famously by the Nordic countries.

The “half revolution” after

this, say the authors, came in the person of American economist Milton Friedman. He militated against big government. Britain’s Margaret Thatcher and United States president Ronald Reagan heeded him and forced their citizens to be more self-reliant, which was very disruptive as the latter had come to expect hand-outs from their governments.

The authors dub Friedman’s mantra a half revolution because Friedman himself acknowledges that he has only partially succeeded, as bloat and inefficiency in government are back, and in some cases bigger than before. As the authors note, Friedman himself said in 2004: “After World War II, opinion was socialist, but the practice was free market. Now, opinion is free market, but practice is nearly socialist.”

Singapore, as created by Mr Lee, they say, “is two parts Hobbes, one part Mill, with a dash of Asian values”. The latter are defined as rooted in focusing on family, saving one’s income, learning for life and having faith in mandarins. The authors, however, stop short of calling Singapore’s governing style “ideal”. That is only to be expected, because their vision of the fourth revolution is of a governing model in which citizens are freer to express themselves and innovate.

But here is where they seem to be running around in circles. Being freer, in the sense of unfettered individualism, is also a big part of what has led to present decay in most governments. As they themselves acknowledge in the book: “Politicians have done what the voters want them to do.”

The authors try to argue their way out of those circles by saying

that a ruling elite should think long term and use technology to tighten things at the national level, while letting the citizenry solve more of society’s problems at the local level by innovating to, say, cut the cost of heart surgery from \$100,000 to \$2,000, as India’s Devi Shetty has done.

This book is also important for firmly laying to rest the myth that Scandinavia has made a success of the Webbs’ welfare state. As the authors see it, the Scandinavians went through massive credit crunches well ahead of the United States and its sub-prime mortgages, and the rest of Europe and its euro crisis.

For instance, the authors show, Sweden had to butcher its public spending programmes after its mortgage rate shot up to 500 per cent in the 1990s. “The streets of Stockholm are awash with the blood of sacred cows,” note the authors. That was after the Danes were faced with a daily diet of potatoes only in the early 1980s.

The thing is, they stress repeatedly, the East is hungry for new ideas and willing to learn, whereas Western leaders are “like ostriches”, burying their heads in the sand. As the authors point out: “If you want to look at the future of higher education, can you learn more from the United States and France, where 40 per cent and 25 per cent of the students drop out, or from South Korea, which beats the world in college enrolment?”

“If you want to set up a pension system, would you look at America’s Social Security system or Singapore’s Central Provident Fund?”

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with a few side-swipes, including about former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew’s apparent “weakness for family ties”, referring to his son’s rise to premier, and the “thrashing” of litterbugs here.

## THE BAD



■ For all their championing of e-government, the authors might have discussed in greater depth how the pressures from netizens’ grouches is changing the ways governments work. Instead, they have focused more on how citizens could use technology to solve problems governments either can’t, won’t or are too slow to do.

## THE IFFY



■ Their view that technology will fuel the fourth revolution in governance is not persuasive. This is because in front of every enabling computer is a human being, and most humans are not exactly stuck on improving things for others intuitively, consistently and fairly. As long as there is a human element, the revolution is not a given. Their bias for technology is also shown up when they discuss global crime rates. They note that the crime rate in developed countries has fallen steadily in recent years, and put this down to better sensors, alarms, DNA fingerprinting and other IT innovations that deter criminals, who they see as mostly young men. But they neglect to weigh the impact of rising cyber-crime, which is not only committed by old as well as young people, but also has a terrifying reach.

## FACT FILE: Collaborators and colleagues with much in common

THE *Economist*’s editor-in-chief, John Micklethwait, and his colleague, Adrian Wooldridge, have to date written six books together on various subjects. Their tomes include the provocative *God Is Back: How The Global Rise Of Faith Is Changing The World*, and their newest – *The Fourth Revolution: The Global Race To Reinvent The State*.

Both have much in common. They are British, they read history at Oxford University and they are both married fathers – Micklethwait has three sons, while Wooldridge has two daughters.

Micklethwait, who celebrated his 52nd birthday on Monday joined *The Economist* in 1987 as finance correspondent, after two years as a banker at Chase

Manhattan. Then followed stints as its business editor and United States editor, before becoming *The Economist*’s 16th editor-in-chief in 2006, succeeding Bill Emmott, who left under a cloud after supporting the US’ second incursion into Iraq in 2003.

Voted the Editors’ Editor in 2010 by his peers, Micklethwait has distinguished himself by

growing the vaunted magazine’s global print circulation by about 500,000 copies, compared to the 1 million when he took over the editorship in 2006.

He has also successfully persuaded his colleagues to adapt their content for the Internet, smartphones and tablets; as at 2013, his magazine had more than 100,000 digital subscribers.

As for Wooldridge, readers of *The Economist*, whose writers famously do not get bylines, will know him better as Schumpeter, the pin-sharp columnist on management issues.

Before he became *The Economist*’s management editor, he was its Washington Bureau chief, and so wrote the Lexington column on American current affairs.