

### Word from the 'Wart'

What is Smart?

What prompted this project on smart nation was my many strolls down Waterloo Street, walking past this beautiful complex with tall trees and an obvious security gate. I discovered that I was looking at the Maghain Aboth Synagogue. Constructed in 1878, it is the oldest and largest Jewish synagogue in Southeast Asia. Googling its history, I then saw old photos of when those tall trees were waist-high hedges. So why the tall trees now? Was it "hiding something"? From what, I wondered. Since those musings in 2015, I have been fascinated by the Jewish history of Singapore, that most people know about this history but it's all a quiet reference (after all, post-independence, our first Chief Minister David Marshall is a Singaporean of Jewish descent). Yet, there's little unknown on the role that Israel played and continue to (quietly) in our national security and ubiquitous National Service; there is even a book out in 2019 on this, *Beating the Odds Together 50 Years of Singapore-Israel Ties*. The book also recounts a comical anecdote that our higher-ups in the 1960s were so concerned about these Israeli advisors that they told everyone they are Mexicans! Such was the fear of "who's here" as since the end of WWII, both countries view their locations as precarious, within a potentially hostile sub-region.

But our Jewish heritage goes way back ... to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, to the many waves of Jewish settlements in Singapore. I hear that their descendants probably number 250; including Jewish expatriates, Singapore Jewish residents number 2-3000 today. Enough for us to still have two working synagogues with tall trees and smart gates.

So, what is a small dot like Singapore to do to be safe and thriving? Get smart. But what is smart?

A wonderfully sweet video, shows a young boy, asking:

*What is a Smart Nation? Is it having more convenience ... more information so you can make smarter decisions? Is it trust? Being certain of who you're dealing with? Is it progress ...? Is it well-being ...? Is it staying ahead so we can stay ahead of the world? So what is a smart nation?²*

If the video had used a two-year-old in his terrible two's, he would have only persisted with: "why, why" and "no".

It is mind boggling how many reports are online about Smart City and Smart Nation, both Singapore and globally. From what I can tell, Smart Nation Singapore boils it down to three *Pillars of a Smart Nation* - Digital Society, Economy, Government.<sup>3</sup> One site brags: *94% of our government services are digital from end to end!* and *We're the world's smartest city for the third year running!*<sup>4</sup>

I also read *Other Goals for 2023*<sup>5</sup>

*We've also set our targets for 2023 and beyond:*

- 70% of eligible Government systems to be hosted on the commercial cloud
- All public officers to have basic digital literacy skills
- All ministry families to have at least 1 AI project for service delivery or policymaking
- At least 10 cross-agency high-impact data analytics projects to be completed per year
- No more than 7 working days to share data for cross-agency projects

It's all good, right?

What is not so obvious or visible to me is the invisible. And worse, the imagined.

We are often reminded of that mind-twisting Donald Rumsfeld statement in 2002 on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction: *Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don't know we don't know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tends to be the difficult ones.*<sup>6</sup> (Bold highlights mine)

Singapore journalist Kirsten Han wrote: *We currently have more than 90,000 police cameras scattered across this little island. Apparently, this isn't enough: Minister for Home Affairs and Law, K Shanmugam, has announced that we will have at least 200,000 of 'em by 2030. Wah lau eh.*<sup>7</sup>

I am delighted that Boedi Widjaja is game enough to take on this cracking open a bit our discussion of what is a smart nation to us as Singapore citizens. *Path. 11, Blindness* is quite an astounding artwork that Boedi has crafted and in many ways, magical. It seems to say that this whole time, "things" happen and "things" work. Painlessly, unassumingly. Or so we think. Is that what smart nation is kind of like? What questions should we be asking?

Says the young boy at end of the *What makes a Smart Nation?* video: *"It's all these things and much, much more".*

And I say: *wah lau eh, what's that mean – "much, much more"?*

<sup>1</sup> 'Wart is short for Stalwart, which Exactly Foundation's first resident Kevin Lee suggested that for future residences, I should pen a statement as "Exactly Foundation Stalwart" -- thought that label carried too much adult responsibility.

<sup>2</sup> *What makes a Smart Nation?* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DJmoy41mWDQ>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.smartnation.gov.sg/about-smart-nation/pillars-of-smart-nation>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.smartnation.gov.sg>

Other sources: <https://www.smartnation.gov.sg/about-smart-nation/our-journey/achievements>

<https://www.imd.org/news/updates/data-shows-effects-of-covid-and-climate-change-on-citizens-perceptions-of-how-smart-their-cities-are/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.smartnation.gov.sg/about-smart-nation/digital-government#the-progress-so-far>

<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/There\\_are\\_known\\_knowns](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/There_are_known_knowns)

<sup>7</sup> Kirsten Han in her WE, THE CITIZENS 7 August 2021 newsletter, *Polcams, polcams everywhere. Surveillance, surveillance everywhere.*