

Questions of Loyalty

Singapore is an island nation in Southeast Asia that has managed to achieve great economic success in the fifty years since its founding. However, due to its small size and lack of natural resources, it is economically and strategically vulnerable to larger nations and global events, and relatively more reliant on skilled human capital for its economic survival. In 2002, the Prime Minister at that time cited a news media report in which several Singaporeans were quoted as saying they would “run at the drop of a hat”, and that they felt “no sense of belonging.” He called them “fair-weather” citizens and “quitters,” asserting that their loyalties were fickle, only willing to remain part of the country when times were good, and would quickly abandon it in times of hardship or crisis or if better prospects arose elsewhere.¹

The Prime Minister’s speech naturally generated a fair amount of debate among Singaporeans. The more patriotically minded largely agreed with the Prime Minister’s implicit moral judgment of those who chose to leave Singapore. Singapore, like many developed nations, provides its citizens with education, protection, infrastructure, and a host of other public goods and services. Like any nation, its success was only made possible by generations of people who stuck it out through hard times. In accepting citizenship and all the benefits that follow, one might argue, its citizens also incur a duty to “give back” and to remain loyal to their nation in the event of crisis or economic hardship, especially because a mass exodus of the people most able to leave (the rich, professional, or educated) would severely inhibit the nation’s ability to sustain itself during, and recover after, any such crisis.

On the other hand, many of the more cosmopolitan argued that the Prime Minister’s remarks were an unfair characterization of those who might wish to seek better opportunities elsewhere or to avoid danger or economic hardship. They argued that while they might not feel the degree of patriotic loyalty that would motivate them to stay in Singapore, to brand them quitters and claim that they were wholly disloyal people was a step too far. Some might have simply wanted to give their children better prospects or a more stable environment in which to grow up. Furthermore, many feel that nations are not relevant moral categories in this highly international and globally interconnected age and find it archaic to think that a person’s character might be judged by whether she feels any sense of loyalty to one particular group of people.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- (1) What, if anything, is good about having a sense of loyalty or belonging to one’s nation?
- (2) How is loyalty to one’s nation similar to or different from loyalty to one’s friends and family?
- (3) Do we have moral duties to contribute to our nation, even at our own expense?

¹ <http://www.todayonline.com/more-singaporeans-overseas-brain-drain-concerns-dissipate>