

Lee Kuan Yew admitted that he was "mesmerised" by socialist ideas. Oct 2001  
 (Ex Prime Minister of SINGAPORE)

stability that is envied throughout Asia.

Critics have accused him of authoritarianism, stunting democracy and crippling a free press. Admirers regard him as a tough-minded pragmatist who overcame corruption and ethnic strife to make Singapore a model of efficiency.

Officially in retirement since 1990, Lee Kuan Yew remains a powerful voice within Singapore's government, as senior minister, as well as an acute observer of the Asian political scene. Contributing Editor Fergus Bordewich recently spent two hours talking with Lee in his offices at the Istana, Singapore's palatial colonial-era government house. Their conversation ranged widely over Singapore's future, human rights and democracy, the roles that China and the United States will play in Asia's future, as well as revealing glimpses of Lee's life.

**BORDEWICH:** What would you say shaped your character the most as a young man?

**LEE:** My mother devoted her life to



FERGUS BORDEWICH has written more than 50 articles for Reader's Digest from all corners of the world. He is also author of three books, including *Cathay: A Journey in Search of Old China*.

bringing up her children properly and giving us a good education. But the traumatic experience of the Japanese Occupation tempered my generation. We saw how brutal, ruthless, cruel – unnecessarily so – an invading army could be. If you have any self-respect, you feel you must do something about this, someday, some time, and not depend on the British or anybody else.

I was idealistic and learnt fast in a very tough world, the rough and tumble of fighting hard-hitting communists, who asked for no quarter and gave none. I wasn't afraid of being bashed up, attacked, denigrated by the communists or by anyone else.

**BORDEWICH:** What did your experience being educated in a British framework contribute?

**LEE:** My political ideas were shaped by my four student years in Britain, from 1946 to 1950. Britain was devastated by bombing, but proud, disciplined, courteous.

I can still remember my astonishment when I came out of the tube station at Trafalgar Square for the first time and found newspapers on low tables and a coin box, and nobody in attendance. You just take the paper you want, put your pennies in. I took a deep breath and said to myself, *This is a civilised people!* Two hundred years of empire and good governance had brought this about.

It's very sad to see Britain today, with football hooligans and mug-

gings. It's a very different Britain, something has gone wrong.

**BORDEWICH:** What lessons can Singapore teach other Asian nations?

**LEE:** If you want to grow to your maximum or optimum potential, structure your society and your policies such that you can make maximum use of international capital, management skills, marketing skills, technology and knowledge.

**BORDEWICH:** In your book *From Third World to First*, you speak of a deep sense of property being instinctive in a person. How did you

turn that into policy, and how did it contribute to stability?

**LEE:** I started off mesmerised by socialist ideas – tax the rich, spread it among the poor. But when I had to run the country, I discovered that you have got to create wealth first. I found that if a man rented a house or a flat at low rents, it will degrade. So, we decided we'll give everybody a chance to buy a flat at subsidised prices. Now we have an asset-owning population, and attitudes are different.

Now when they vote, they know that if they have an untrustworthy government, wrong policies, their properties, their shares, will go down



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Lee Kuan Yew - Author of book 39  
 "FROM THIRD WORLD TO FIRST"  
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