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Use your brain!

AS SURE as the sun rises over Katong and sets over Jurong, a reader wrote to this newspaper a few days ago in response to the Gurmit Singh "SAR-vivor Rap" commissioned by the Ministry of Health and the Health Promotion Board in their fight against the severe acute respiratory syndrome, or Sars.

Lines like "Some say *leh*, some say *lah*", "Don't *kak-pui* all over the place" and "Don't do things and become a *re-gretter*", said the reader, "are not words I would want my children to learn or mimic".

"The lyrics of the rap are coarse and uncouth," Mr Peter Wong declared.

It's not my intention here to go into the merits and demerits of that Sars rap; on any linguistic issue, there'll be sharp views on both sides.

My own response when I first caught the video clip on television was sheer delight — not so much in its artistic appeal but in the fact that a government agency had seen fit to air it on national television.

After all, there is a strong contingent of linguistic purists within the Government; in fact, this year's Speak Good English Movement is due to be launched by a Cabinet minister in exactly two weeks' time.

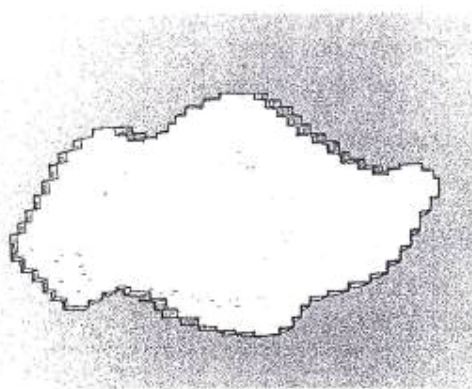
That Gurmit's rap airs on prime time television means simply that Sars is a bigger scourge than *leh*s and *lah*s. Compromising linguistic purity so that the message can reach — and stay with — a wider audience is, in my book, a necessary and worthwhile sacrifice. What are words but man-made devices for communication?

Indeed, Phua Chu Kang's prose is pristine compared to the vulgarities and obscenities that erupt like teenage acne in the music of pop musicians like Eminem, which our teenagers imbibe with nary an ounce of parental guidance.

All this brings me to the bigger issue, which is, Remaking Singapore.

It's the remaking season right now, with three of the five sub-committees having announced their recommendations, and the remaining two set to do so by the end of the month. Amid the kaleidoscopic whirl of media coverage however, it's easy to miss the big picture wood for the trees of specific recommendations.

Many Singaporeans think the Re-



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DETERMINISTIC HIERARCHY WILL PROBABLY BE THE FIRST CASUALTY OF REMAKING SINGAPORE. THE STAIRCASE THAT SEEMINGLY LEADS UPWARDS WILL BE LIKE AN ESCHER STAIRCASE, WHERE ASCENDING PROVES TO BE DESCENDING AT THE SAME TIME.



WEDNESDAY

WITH CHUA LEE HOONG

making Singapore Committee (RSC) is the social and political counterpart to the Economic Review Committee (ERC), which in a sense it is, except that the ERC is the primary body and the RSC, the secondary one.

The latter complements the former to seek "a fundamental review of Singapore's strategies for economic growth and survival as a nation", is how the RSC website puts it.

The ultimate aim is economic survival. It's not about making Singapore kinder and gentler, or more gracious, or less stressful — except insofar as these will aid Singapore's long-term survival.

"Remaking Singapore", in fact, emerged first, almost two years ago, as Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew's portentous phrase for what Singapore must do in response to China rising.

In a recent restatement of his position, he said: "We have to remake ourselves, have a more entrepreneurial

ment in our society, and shift our education system to produce a different kind of worker. This is a long-term process and has nothing to do with Sars and nothing to do with Sept 11."

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, the RSC head, elaborated last week by saying that the key issue is changing mindsets: Singaporeans must learn to be less dependent on the Government, must take initiative for themselves and must not feel that the Government owes them a living.

This is absolutely correct, except that there are more mindsets to be changed than simple dependency, and even dependency alone cannot be reduced just one way. It has to be reduced the other way too.

It's only natural: If there is no entitlement to government support, there can be no entitlement to support from the people either. Not just electorally, but in things such as sparing the Housing Board the agonies of legal suits when flats or toilets don't measure up, or giving the Land Transport Authority another chance when the North-East Line gets delayed, once again.

A more entrepreneurial society must

entail a more litigious society, or at least, a society where rights — civil or personal — are more vigorously and stridently fought for.

A secure, if steady, determinism has hitherto characterised much of Singapore society — get good exam results, get a good job; your pay rises as you grow older; if you want to speak, get a police permit.

Overarching these well-known principles is the belief in hierarchy; not just any hierarchy but one that places the Government at the apex.

Other institutions — state, civic or private — are, at best, handmaidens of the Government in the good governance exercise, and, at worst, rival centres of power that must be co-opted, vanquished or brought to heel.

The notion that institutions and individuals can have legitimate and, in fact, socially necessary roles as checks and balances isn't one that's encouraged.

CHANGING CENTRE OF GRAVITY

WITH Remaking Singapore not a Fabian fad but an economic necessity, however, profound changes are called for in these notions and mindsets.

The Government's comfort zone will narrow; over time, as Dr Balakrishnan acknowledged, "the centre of gravity, of power, will alter. The rules of engagement will change. OB markers, the avenues for expression, regulations, all these will change".

In fact, deterministic hierarchy will probably be the first casualty of Remaking Singapore. The staircase that seemingly leads upwards will be like an Escher staircase, where ascending proves to be descending at the same time.

What can we expect in the next few years as Remaking Singapore gets seriously under way?

More noise, certainly, as the "SAR-vivor Rap" controversy shows.

Remakers among the public will be impatient with those segments of government that are slow in Remaking, while government agencies which are already Remade will encounter resistance from un-Remade people.

There will be a higher decibel level of national debate, in which Phua Chu Kang's voice will no doubt feature as one of the loudest.

That in itself is no bad thing, if the message that Singaporeans take home with them is: Use your brain! Use your brain! Use your brain!