Patriotism is not something we hear about very often in Singapore, at least not in an “in your face” way. But the term – and what it stands for – is not absent in everyday discourse in Singapore. Indeed, it is enthusiastically and candidly discussed in the social media, especially during the annual National Day season.

Last year’s general election period offered another occasion for netizens to air views on what they think of Singapore, and about not confusing love for the country with unquestioning support for the government of the day.

From social media discussions and routine conversations, one gathers that most Singaporeans do feel a sense of attachment to Singapore, though to different extents. Most love the iconic hawker fare, like laksa, char kway teow, roti prata and nonya kueh, notwithstanding the fact that the origins of some of these are still being contested by our former fellow nationals up north.

They also love the familiarity of the place, be it in the form of wet markets or town parks, though there are occasional murmurings about how some important local landmarks have disappeared or have been earmarked for demolition to make way for roads, shopping malls or condominiums.
Most, if not all, affirm the importance of friends and family in rooting them to Singapore. A handful who mentioned the role of national service in inculcating their love for Singapore certainly come across as the ideal citizens Singapore can count on. Some are genuinely proud of what Singapore stands for: multiracialism, meritocracy, opportunity and excellence.

Beyond anecdotal data, survey findings based on representative samples provide concrete evidence that the relationship between Singaporeans and their nation is somewhat strong.

The National Orientations of Singaporeans (NOS) survey series conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies once every four to six years since 1993, and based on sample sizes of about 2,000 in each wave, shows that, on average, Singaporeans score 7.4 on a 10-point scale measuring their “emotional ties” to Singapore.

The scale is quite comprehensive, comprising 24 items pertaining to national identity, national pride, sense of belonging and “willingness to sacrifice” for the nation, soliciting responses to statements such as “I am proud to be a Singaporean” and “Singapore is worth defending no matter what the cost is to me”.

Over the last two decades, there have indeed been some fluctuations in Singaporeans’ strength of emotional attachment to Singapore, starting off with a score of 7.75 in 1993, declining to 7.25 in 2005, and rising to 7.36 in the most recent survey in 2009.

But when seen against a backdrop of increasing globalisation and social complexity, one may argue that the scores have remained remarkably stable and healthy. In qualitative terms, the NOS surveys indicate that, by and large, most Singaporeans consider the nation to be an important part of their own biography, identity, sense of well-being, way of life or social location in the world, and therefore worth defending.

This explains why, at the very least, they would feel annoyed if foreigners see Singapore as a country lacking in creativity, innovativeness or, worse, social graces, even if they may often agree with some of these criticisms when among their Singaporean friends.
When overseas, they are likely to betray a sense of national pride when telling people they meet that they are from Singapore, that “little red dot” with a track record of punching above its weight.

At home, a significant number of Singaporeans would have a sort of quasi-religious experience when the national flag is raised, accompanied by a lusty singing of the national anthem during the National Day Parade.

Not yet tested is the proportion of Singaporeans who would be willing to sacrifice something of great value – including the ultimate sacrifice of giving up their lives – for Singapore should the need arise. This poses a critical question, but one which we hope could be answered in favourable circumstances.

Much as this question is important, it should not be construed that the only way by which to gauge a person’s patriotism is the extent to which he or she is willing to make the ultimate sacrifice.

Patriotism is not an “all-or-nothing” quality. It should not be based on a dichotomous paradigm which imposes unrealistic demands on a migrant and heterogeneous population and, paradoxically, hinders the process of its developing a strong national identity and thereby patriotism.

In more practical terms, if most Singaporeans have some measure of love for Singapore, feel a sense of solidarity with other Singaporeans, identify with what it stands for in terms of values and way of life, and care about where it is heading, then the nation is off to a good start, given its relatively short history and the fact that Singapore has not (God forbid) faced any serious, protracted hostilities during the last four decades.

The argument that Singapore is, from the perspective of nation-building, still a work in progress is not a mere excuse for its nationals’ nascent patriotism, but has a strong empirical basis.

Singapore has not experienced any great defining moments, at least not the kind that can propel it from being merely a place in which to make a living – as encapsulated by the label Singapore, Inc – to being the embodiment of an unshakeable national spirit.
The latter is the product of a population confronting common threats – with other nations defining who they think we are – as well as the positive outcome of our coming to see ourselves as a people, not just a population, in the process of our doing things together and confronting common threats as one people.

The above interpretation of history is a contestable one, given that Singapore has experienced such milestones as separation from Malaysia, the British military withdrawal east of Suez, the Indonesian Confrontation, the 1997 Asian financial crisis, as well as the more recent Sars and H1N1 pandemics. These are undeniably part of our social memory. However, they occurred in an era when the Government was run on a more paternalistic mode.

**Paternalism** has contributed to mobilising a heterogeneous population in a new state to get its act together both as an economy and a nation. But paternalism does have its limitations insofar as nation-building becomes more of the Government’s project, rather than the people’s project, with the Government as a partner and facilitator.

This is not to deny that the Government’s strategies and efforts have made Singapore more of a nation than it was some 40 years ago, but that top-down mobilisation could become counterproductive, and national rituals and ceremonies seen as rather contrived, resulting in the process of raising national consciousness coming across as lacking in authenticity, and people losing their sense of ownership in the nation-building process. More importantly, however, it is also not to suggest that Singapore can do without a competent, proactive government, working tirelessly for the nation and its future. Such an argument would be rather naive.

As Singapore becomes more of a middle-class society, leading to a more mature citizenry, there is great potential and promise that Singaporeans will step forward to pursue collective goals as their national projects. Thankfully, this is already happening as we speak.

Singapore is at the threshold of a defining moment in its history when the people are rising up to take ownership of its destiny, while state paternalism makes way for state-people partnership, armed with a strong sense of national purpose.
This will produce a patriotism which is more than just about love of food, place, family and friends, but extending into the realm of a national community where the people can be counted upon to stick with it through thick and thin, since nation-building would increasingly be the collective project of the people and the Government.

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This is the first of a six-part series by National University of Singapore academics on topical issues.