# A History of
## Singapore's
# Speakers' Corner

**CAPE** Spotlighting Activism

# What is the Speaker's Corner?

Launched on 1 September 2000 by **the Singapore Government as a "free speech area",** it is Singapore's first and only designated outdoor venue where citizens can give public speeches without having to apply for the Public Entertainment Licence.

**Since then, public speeches have been made at Speaker's Corner on issues such as...**
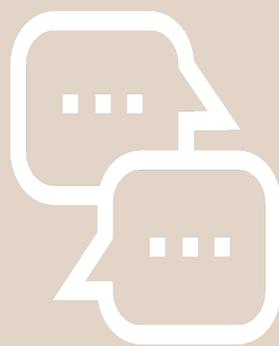
Freedom of Speech

LGBT Issues
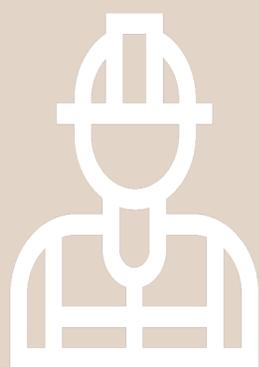
Labour Issues

Political Concerns

# There are laws in Singapore that govern an individual's ability to speak up on issues through the media and in physical spaces:

## 1948
### SEDITION ACT

- Prohibits seditious acts and speech; and the printing, publication, sale, distribution, reproduction and importation of seditious publication
- Updated in 2007 to include section 298A, which governs speech pertaining to religion and race

## 1974
### NEWSPAPERS AND PRINTING PRESSES ACT

- Gives the minister the power to appoint management
- Shareholders of all newspaper companies and to control any transfers of such management shares
- Also gives the management shareholders, and by proxy the government, a minimum 66% majority in any votes regarding staffing decisions

## 1958
### PUBLIC ENTERTAINMENTS ACT

- Allows authority figures to suspend or cancel a public entertainment license
- Definition of public entertainment was expanded to include film exhibitions, songs and speech in 2002

# Before the Speakers' Corner, how did people make their voice heard on these issues?

**1** Speak in public without a permit
e.g. Chee Soon Juan's lunchtime rally at the Central Business District in 1998 and 1999 on free speech laws

**2** Apply for a permit to hold a public speaking event
e.g. the 2000 *People Like Us* application to hold a public forum on 'Gays and Lesbians within Singapore 21'

*But both methods had their limitations.*
**Can you guess why?**

# The **Idea** of Speaker's Corner

## 1999

During an interview for *The New York Times*, Lee Kuan Yew shared that Singapore would probably take on the suggestion to set up a legal public-speaking area similar to Speakers' Corner in London's Hyde Park.

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Similar ideas had surfaced in *The Straits Times* after Chee Soon Juan of the Singapore Democratic Party **insisted on speaking without a permit** at Raffles Place on 29 December 1998 and 5 January 1999.

"If you believe in democracy, you must believe in it unconditionally. If you believe that men should be free, then, **they should have the right of free association, of free speech, of free publication**. Then, no law should permit those democratic processes to be set at nought."
- Lee Kuan Yew *as a then-opposition leader, April 27, 1955*

# 2000

## A Speaker's Corner is born

**1 Sept:** Modelled after Speakers' Corner in London's Hyde Park, **initial rules were kept to the minimum:**
- **Singapore citizen**
- Speech in either of the 4 official languages
- Content in accordance to Sedition Act, *with religion or themes that may contribute to hostility between racial or religious groups disallowed*

Further easing of restrictions in 2008 when demonstrations can be organised by Singapore citizens without police permit, which **led to increase in large-crowd events and Speakers' Corner usage.**

# 2008

Viewed as an unprecedented step towards free and unregulated speech, the launch attracted journalists globally, including reports by *The New York Times*.

By the end of September 2000, initial crowds of speakers and attendees had diminished; by January 2001, the Speakers' Corner saw **only 12 registrations** for the month.

# 2004

In 2004, further exemptions from licensing requirements at the venue were were granted to include performances and exhibitions.

# Speaker's Corner in Action

## May 2009: Pink Dot

First legal outdoor LGBTQ+ event attended by >**2500**[1].
Now a movement with an annual event that campaigns for Singapore to be an inclusive society f**or all across the gender and sexuality spectrum**[2].

## Feb, May, Oct 2013: Population White Paper

**4000** Singaporeans turned up to voice out about the 2013 White Paper's issues of population growth and immigration[3]. Citizens came with placards and speeches were made on topics ranging from **migrant worker rights, income inequality, social support and economic productivity**[4,5].

## May 2013: Free My Internet

In response to IMDA's new online licensing amendments,[6] **1500** Singaporeans, primarily bloggers, organised to protest against what they perceived as further clampdowns on freedom of speech in the online sphere. In addition, they wrote a policy paper for MPs to consider and staged an internet blackout to highlight the issue[7].

# Speaker's Corner in Action

## Feb 2013: Operation Coldstore's 50th Anniversary

**700** attendees, mostly in their 70s and 80s, commemorated the 50th anniversary of the 1963 Operation Coldstore. Former detainees gave testimonies, and a billboard of names of those arrested was erected, and demands were made for more transparency from the state regarding the Internal Security Act, an apology for past arrests and the abolishment of the Act[8].

## Sep 2017: Reserved Elections

The 2016 Constitutional Amendments to the elected presidency, with the 2017 Presidential elections with just one candidate[9] prompted **hundreds** of Singaporeans to hold a silent protest who felt the walkover election "undermined meritocracy" and **spoke out against being denied a choice to vote for their president**.[10]

## Sep 2019: Singapore Climate Rally (SGCR)

Local youth climate activists organised their first climate rally at Speaker's Corner, drawing a crowd of **more than 1700.** Included speeches, petition writing and a 'die-in' event. The rally refocused accountability from individuals towards system actors of state and corporations, touching on carbon taxes, divestment, petrochemical industries, and environmental education.[11]

# food for thought

**1** What is the importance of having a physical space for free speech to a healthy democracy, distinct from other forms such as the rise in online alternatives?

**2** What are some different ways to voice one's concerns as an active citizen? And what is the tradeoff of a free-speaking space sanctioned by the state?

**3** How can we practically approach engaging sensitive issues in Singapore?

# References

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For more information, go to: **[bit.ly/SpotlightSpeakersCorner]**

## CAPE

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CAPE, or the Community for Advocacy & Political Education – a student organisation based in Yale-NUS College – was founded in 2017 by students from Yale-NUS College and the Law Faculty of the National University of Singapore (NUS). An independent and non-partisan community, we aim to build capacity for political literacy and constructive participation in Singapore's civic democracy.

**cape.commons.yale-nus.edu.sg**