

■ COMMENTARY

SICC – 180 years serving business interests in Singapore

By Victor Mills

SINGAPORE'S longest serving chamber of commerce celebrates the 180th anniversary of its founding on Feb 8. The Singapore International Chamber of Commerce (SICC) was founded by a handful of business people in Singapore on Feb 8, 1837.

The catalyst for the establishment of the Chamber was the proposal by the East India Company – then the government of the day – to impose taxes without representation. These taxes would have removed Singapore's free port status, undermined free trade and adversely affected Singapore's attractiveness as a business and transshipment hub.

The founders of the Chamber successfully argued their case. Singapore remained a free port. This laid the foundations for the sustainability of business in general and for Singapore's development as an entrepot.

Following its formation, the Chamber reiterated its free market position in its inaugural meeting by stating that the Chamber was formed for the "purpose of watching over the commercial interests" of Singapore.

That mission remains unchanged. SICC continues to advocate business-friendly mindsets and policies in the wider interest of a vibrant economy. That was important in 1837 and remains vital today. Without a vibrant economy, our very special city state would not survive.

First business chamber in Singapore

Singapore's first business chamber initially represented British and European trading houses up until World War II. After the war, and for the first 20 years of Singapore's independence, the

Chamber mainly represented foreign MNCs.

These companies were invited to Singapore by the government to help develop Singapore's economy and to provide jobs which would improve the quality of life of Singaporeans.

In the last 32 years, membership of the Chamber has evolved to a desirable 50:50 mix of large and small, local and foreign businesses. The membership of SICC reflects the diversity of today's business community. That diversity is a tremendous strength only because the Chamber has worked hard to build and maintain a very inclusive space.

Cutting across all possible silos of ethnicity, nationality and business sector, the SICC platform allows its members to safely interact with each other and with government, learn from one another, increase mutual understanding and expand business opportunities. Having members from over 40 nationalities representing more than 20 business sectors makes the Chamber truly international and enhances its voice.

Today and tomorrow

Like the city state we call home, SICC respects the past but is firmly focused on today and on the future of business and on Singapore's sustainability. This is why the Chamber champions some key themes, the first of which is Asean.

The future for much of Singapore business lies in finding new relevance in our region's markets. Understanding the different business cultures of Asean member states and speaking their languages are first steps to identifying what problems consumers face in different countries. Once consumer problems have been

identified, solutions can be found via collaborative innovation with multiple partners which will build businesses, relevancy and sustainability.

In support of the aspiration of an Asean Economic Community, SICC's Asean Committee organises regular meetings to stay informed and discuss current issues.

The next theme SICC champions today is collaborative innovation. The contention is that the fastest way to innovate is to collaborate. This is just as true for large companies as it is for small ones. That's why the Chamber runs both the Innovation Series Events at which members share their innovation journeys with a focus on why they needed to innovate, how they executed their strategy, how they overcame expected and unexpected obstacles, and what they would do differently next time.

The SICC Awards celebrate and recognise collaborative innovations between large and small companies to increase collective learning and to encourage others to do the same.

Both of these themes are supported by the Chamber's focus on inclusivity.

A wise woman once said: "Diversity is a given, inclusivity is not."

The Chamber believes in breaking down real and apparent barriers and perceptions based on academic qualifications, age, different abilities, gender and race. SICC celebrates inclusivity by advocating and practising competency-based recruitment which emphasises a person's skill-sets and their potential rather than their academic qualifications, age, different abilities, gender and race.

One of the SICC Award categories celebrates companies which, in the opinion of their em-

ployees, practise competency-based recruitment.

A large part of successful inclusivity in business is the ability of people to manage inclusive teams. When everyone feels included, engagement is higher, customers are happier and business is both profitable and sustainable. One of the SICC Awards categories celebrates companies which, in the opinion of their employees, practise inclusivity.

Lifelong learning is another theme SICC advocates. We believe it is essential that everyone recognises that no one owes them a living. All of us, either as individuals, companies or countries, never "arrive". We all need to continually reinvent ourselves to stay relevant. That means we all need to keep learning new skills and new competencies to achieve our potential.

Singapore's founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew said: "Without a strong Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), there is no economic future."

This is precisely why SICC has always supported National Service and NSmen. They provide the security under which companies can thrive. The Chamber supports the NSmark because companies owe it to their NSmen to ensure they are supported while serving the country and are not disadvantaged in their careers.

As SICC celebrates its 180th birthday, the Chamber salutes this very special country that is its home and its member companies and their employees who helped make it so and will help keep it exceptional.

■ The writer is the chief executive of the Singapore International Chamber of Commerce.

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