



Intentional Public Engagement:
The Next Phase of
Government-Citizen Relations
Yeoh Chee Yan

Narratives and the
Institutional Imagination
Catherine Fieschi

Making Public Policy Relevant for
Bicultural Families in Singapore
*Paulin Tay Straughan &
Kharina Zainal*

The Nature of Public Trust
in Government
A Conversation with Paul Light



ETHOS

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Of the key constituents of society, the public sector is the most directly accountable, through the various institutions of state and the political process, to the people and the national good. Yet by popular reckoning it has also been slowest to adapt to the shifting pulse of a modern, diverse polity as well as to the emerging technologies that have enabled sweeping changes in the marketplace and other spheres. In Singapore, this criticism may be less than fair — bound since the earliest years of independence by the necessities of nation-building and survival, our people and their government have co-evolved an intimate and intricate, mutually reinforcing relationship often described as familial.

On its part, Singapore's public sector has been at the forefront of laying the groundwork — in terms of infrastructure, education and other long-term investments — that has enabled our citizens to thrive and better determine their own lives. It has gone about this with characteristic purpose, yet with a relatively light touch: Singapore's lively online culture today testifies to this. It is in part because we have been able to support a world-class network and

commercial environment, for example, that we can become accustomed to the latest advancements in global communication — including Gmail, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter — and now find our own time-honoured domestic systems perhaps sluggish in comparison.

Public impatience is not necessarily bad: it can, for example, spur greater effort and hence higher standards of service, or point to areas that warrant greater attention. At the same time, it is the public sector's accountability that often stays its hand: it must be more circumspect about due process, privacy, security and equity than profit-oriented corporations, for instance. Is it reasonable to expect a more educated, empowered public, less dependent on government direction than in past decades, to appreciate the constraints under which the public sector must operate, and to parley accordingly? As a young nation, Singapore has yet to fully cultivate the social apparatus for civil public discourse that many other developed nations have taken centuries to nurture. Yet as an open society and globalised economy, we find ourselves in circumstances as complex as those faced by any global city, if not more so:

we must therefore be quick learners, and find new ways to relate to each other civilly, productively and meaningfully as a nation.

Remarkably for an institution that has played such a leading role in national life for decades, the public sector is taking firmer steps towards more purposeful engagement and collaboration, seeking to fold the public into the governance process in intentional and integrated ways that may demand core changes in the way it operates (*p. 7*). There is a tendency for the public sector to presume it knows best what is in the broad national interest: although it often has the clearest grasp of the big picture, agreement about the most pressing issues, or what is to be done about them, cannot readily be assumed in society at large. Instead, consensus has to be sought and built upon. In this, the tone and tenure of interactions will matter — McLuhan's adage, that the medium is the message, is still worth heeding. While digital channels have come to the fore in recent years, it still behoves government agencies to pay attention to all points of contact they have with the public, whether online or offline, transactional or deliberative, in routine or exceptional circumstances (*p. 13*). When the goal is to engender goodwill and trust, particularly in realms where the government is not the primary arbiter of behaviour, transparency, humility and good humour seem appropriate, at little

risk to professional integrity (*p. 22*). It may be more useful for the public sector to serve as referee, ensuring fair and safe interaction, rather than try to determine the flow of discourse, which has grown increasingly kaleidoscopic.

But engagement should not be confined to the savvier, more assertive cohort of Singaporeans alone: the launch of the Pioneer Generation Package has demonstrated that the public sector is still best placed to convene and scale up efforts to reach the less well-connected but no less valued members of society; it can also help bring different segments of society together (in this case, different generations), in effective yet deeply personal ways (*p. 29*). A maturing society that becomes more diverse and complex can grow more robust, if its sense of shared destiny can accommodate these various personal stories (*p. 48*). The challenge is to do so without overgeneralising for administrative convenience: just as the Pioneer Generation is not homogenous, neither are our ethnic communities, families, or households (*p. 53 and p. 58*). Meaningful participation generates its own commitment. When individual citizens feel that their unique needs and aspirations are acknowledged, that they have a place in society, they are more likely to feel a stake in the national wellbeing, and more prepared to contribute to the common weal.

Other articles in this issue explore the nature of public trust in government — and why Singapore should value the broad respect its institutions enjoy (*p. 63*), as well as perceptions of fairness in public policy, suggesting that there are many implicit, unspoken assumptions, beyond the measurable indicators, that may influence and inform public opinion, depending on whose view is asked (*p. 69*).

The good news is that our national relations remain strong: the higher expectations placed on our Public Service reflect an underlying confidence in its capability, trustworthiness, impartiality and excellence; for the people of Singapore, ours is a government worth engaging with. This should never be taken for granted.

I wish you an insightful read.

Alvin Pang
Editor-in-Chief
ETHOS

Intentional Public Engagement: The Next Phase of Government-Citizen Relations

Public engagement in Singapore should become more purposeful, meaningful and integrated across traditional institutional and sectoral boundaries.

BY
YEOW CHEE YAN

Yeoh Chee Yan is Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth. She chairs the Committee on Citizen Engagement under the PS21 Executive Committee, which provides strategic guidance and coordination on whole-of-government engagement issues.



The case for more effective public engagement is clear. A government that has a good relationship with the public is better able to formulate better policies, deliver better services, and achieve better outcomes for society. Well-designed public engagement can help a government draw on the knowledge and wisdom of a more sophisticated citizenry in order to illuminate complex issues, and involve committed citizens constructively in developing and implementing relevant solutions. Public engagement also nurtures common spaces in which citizens get to hear and appreciate the diversity of perspectives among themselves. Where interests align, citizens may themselves step forward to contribute towards better public outcomes, or to help address issues within their communities. Effective and sustained public engagement therefore helps to strengthen relationships and trust, both between the government and the public, and among citizens. The end result is a more inclusive Singapore in which people are engaged in service to each other for the common good.

Given the growing importance of public engagement to the work of government, practitioners across the public sector came together in 2012 to form a learning community, termed the *Public Engagement Network (PEN)*, to help public agencies level up their capabilities in this area. PEN has developed a *Public Engagement Field Guide* to provide agencies with an over-arching framework

for public engagement, information on best practices in public engagement, and a range of relevant tools. Singapore's Civil Service College has also developed a *Public Engagement Competency Model* to guide practitioners' capability development, and has implemented several training courses for public officers.

Towards More Intentional Public Engagement

Nonetheless, there are several areas in which Singapore's public sector could do more to improve its approach to public engagement.

First, the relationship between policy development and public engagement processes should be made clear, so that the insights derived from engagement contribute to more robust policymaking. It is worth noting that there is no "one size fits all" model for engagement, because each policy issue is unique and will have a blend of hard and soft constraints. The level and amount of involvement the public has in any policy will invariably depend on the nature of the issue, the relevant constraints, and the decision-making space. These factors will need to be considered when selecting engagement approaches, for example, outreach, consultation or co-creation.

For example, where there are hard policy constraints and very limited options, a public engagement exercise premised on co-creation may

lead to mismatched expectations and the perception that the engagement exercise is not constructive, or worse, disingenuous. A more appropriate engagement approach might be to provide more information on the considerations behind policy decisions, and then to

mitigate the impact on segments of the public who may be adversely affected by the policy.

The key is to choose the most appropriate approach that best balances national objectives with public expectations of the policy. When done well, the public

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT PAST AND PRESENT

Public engagement has been an important element of the policy development and implementation process since Singapore's independence. In the early years of nation-building, the People's Association was established to engage with citizens on national policies. It helped to explain the rationale behind some of the less popular ones, and demonstrated the Government's concern for the public. The feedback that was gathered from citizens helped to refine policies and their implementation.

As citizens became better educated and informed, they began to express their views on policies that would affect their lives. In 2006, the Feedback Unit was restructured as REACH or "Reaching Everyone for Active Citizenry @ Home", signalling the Government's shift from gathering feedback to actively engaging and connecting with citizens. Public agencies began to actively consult the public to better understand different points of view before making policy changes. More recently, efforts have been made to engage wider segments of the population in more diverse areas of policy as well as national issues.

Our Singapore Conversation in 2013 saw citizens from all walks of life coming together to discuss their collective aspirations for the future; these have continued in the more recent SGfuture engagements. The launch of the recent Pioneer Generation Package was accompanied with a high-touch outreach initiative, with citizen volunteers helping the elderly pioneers in their community to better understand the new policy and its benefits (see also "Communicating to Our Pioneer Generation" on page 29).

NOTE

1. The Pioneer Generation Package was launched in 2014 to recognise and honour the contributions of Singapore's pioneer generation towards nation-building. It provides them with several forms of healthcare support.

will have a better appreciation of the considerations and trade-offs behind the policy issue, and genuinely feel that the engagement process was authentic and led to better outcomes.

Second, public agencies could collaborate better on public engagement efforts, which are often not as wide or deep as they could be. Agencies typically engage stakeholders around their specific policies and programmes, rather than from the citizens' perspective. But the issues that citizens grapple with are not always neatly organised by agency policy domains; often, their needs cut across agency mandates and boundaries. In tandem, government policies have grown increasingly complex and often require significant inter-agency collaboration at the policy level (e.g., Medishield Life, CPF).

Public agencies could collaborate better on public engagement efforts, which are often not as wide or deep as they could be.

The way the Government engages the public must similarly take on a collaborative approach: rather than adopting a reductionist approach, we should create opportunities for agencies to engage the public on broad cross-cutting issues, organised from the citizens' point of view instead of through an institutional lens. This approach

will help policymakers connect with citizens better, and develop a more comprehensive understanding of their diverse needs.

Third, all agencies should strengthen internal capacity and capability for co-creation and co-delivery with citizens. While PEN has helped level up public engagement expertise across the public service, the expertise and experience among agencies remain uneven. Agencies will need to invest more resources to strengthen their own capabilities to engage with the public effectively. While past engagement efforts have typically focused more on citizens as customers of our policies or services, the next stage of engagement will seek greater participation from citizens as *partners*, with a shared responsibility to co-develop and co-deliver solutions. Singapore's public sector will therefore have to intensify capability development efforts across all agencies in consensus building, co-creation, stakeholder relationship management and volunteer management.

Positive Steps Forward

The Government has taken steps to address these areas. While public engagement, policy development, public communications and service delivery are intimately linked and inter-dependent, in practice, within and across agencies, the process of integration can be uneven at times. While these are distinct areas of expertise, and typically reside in

While past engagement efforts have typically focused more on citizens as customers of our policies or services, the next stage of engagement will seek greater participation from citizen as partners. Singapore's public sector will have to intensify capability development efforts across all agencies in consensus building, co-creation, stakeholder relationship management and volunteer management.

separate units, their work has to be tightly integrated.

In the last two years, the Public Service has made good progress in integrating public engagement with public communications, but we must not stop there. Instead, we must work on developing the appropriate inter-agency processes and structures that will support an *integrated approach* that brings together public engagement, public communications, policy development and delivery. This will facilitate the effective formulation and implementation of policies that meet and address the needs of Singapore and Singaporeans. Clear and intentional public engagement and communications on issues of importance to the public should be regarded as critical elements of the policy process.

To this end, Singapore's public sector has started investing in stronger coordinating structures and processes for public engagement that will bridge inter-agency gaps, and identify emerging areas and opportunities

for collaboration. The Committee on Citizen Engagement (CCE) under the PS21 Executive Committee will provide strategic guidance and coordination on Whole-of-Government engagement issues. It will work with agencies across government to build the spectrum of capabilities needed to involve citizens meaningfully in dialogue, co-creation and co-delivery. The CCE will also help agencies embed public engagement in their priorities, workplans and processes, and depending on their context and needs, include public engagement at various points of the policy cycle. This will include increasing meaningful and sustainable opportunities for citizen participation in the public sector.

Clear and intentional public engagement and communications on issues of importance to the public should be regarded as critical elements of the policy process.

Public engagement will only succeed if public officers are sincere, have a good understanding of citizens' concerns and are able to connect with empathy.

Public engagement is core to the work of Singapore's public sector, and we need to sustain our efforts over the long term, across all our agencies. Senior leaders in government and leaders at all levels must have a deep understanding of the interplay between public engagement, public communications, policy development and

delivery, and intentionally weave these elements together. Public engagement practitioners and middle management in agencies should reach out to their counterparts across the Public Service to seek better overall policy outcomes for their agencies. Most critically, public engagement will only succeed if public officers are sincere, have a good understanding of citizens' concerns and are able to connect with empathy. Our aim is to work in partnership with our citizens to build a more resilient and cohesive society. ✧

Engaging Citizens in the Digital Age

As public engagement grows online, the Public Service will need a strong social media policy that integrates both online and offline strategies as well as mindset and role shifts in service delivery to truly reap the benefits of social media.

BY **CINDY TAN** Cindy Tan is Senior Researcher at the Institute of Governance and Policy, Civil Service College.



Engaging Citizens: A Priority for the Public Service

Public engagement is not new to the Singapore government. With a vision to be “One Trusted Public Service with Citizens at the Centre”, our public agencies are continually monitoring and making sense of ground sentiments in the process of policy development and service delivery. The Public Service does not work in isolation, even though it is not always easy to get the whole public — including private individuals, businesses and civic groups — to fully appreciate all the considerations and trade-offs involved in policymaking. Nevertheless, effective public engagement results in better policies and services that take into account the needs of citizens in different circumstances. It can also increase mutual trust and shared ownership of policy outcomes, as more public issues become multi-dimensional and cut across traditional agency, demographic or sectoral boundaries.

Platforms to Engage the Public Over the Years

In the early years of Singapore’s independence, the priority in government

engagement was to get the word out to citizens from all walks of life in order to help them understand the key messages and rationale behind public policies. One of the Government’s initial campaigns, “Keep Singapore Clean”, saw posters and banners in English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil — Singapore’s four official languages — displayed in public places. Other forms of communication included leaflets, pamphlets, car-bumper stickers, stick-up strips, postal items and cinema tickets with stamps of the campaign slogan as well as public education talks and lectures.² Subsequently, other campaigns such as the “National Courtesy”, “Speak Mandarin” and “Stop at Two” were launched using a mixture of these mediums to communicate government policies.

As Singapore developed and the public became more educated and outspoken, communication platforms were set up for citizen voices to be heard. For example, the Feedback Unit was set up in 1985 to explain policies and assess sentiments on public issues through face-to-face platforms such as dialogues, tea sessions and conferences. In September 2000, the Speakers’ Corner at the Hong Lim

“We must be close to the ground, listening to feedback, sensing the deeper concerns that often underlie that feedback, and spotting the gaps in policy delivery that should not be there.”

Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam¹

ENGAGING THE NATION: OUR SINGAPORE CONVERSATION

In August 2012, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced the need for “Our Singapore Conversation” (OSC) to engage Singaporeans on our desired future for the country. Open-ended group conversations and discussions were held to generate ideas on the public’s aspirations while the Ministries held thematic dialogues on housing, education, healthcare and jobs. Community groups also organised ground-up dialogues, including some in places such as food centres and schools to broaden the reach of the effort. A face-to-face OSC survey was conducted in four official languages. The OSC website, Facebook page and YouTube channel were also used to encourage the public to share their views online. By mid-2013, these diverse engagement platforms had yielded inputs from over 660,000 Singaporeans, contributing to key policy recommendations in housing, healthcare and education.¹

NOTE

1. Melissa Khoo and Yee Lai Fong, “Redefining Engagement: Lessons for the Public Service from Our Singapore Conversation”, *Ethos* issue 13, June 2014: 7–17.

Park was made available for citizens to give public speeches without having to obtain a Public Entertainment Licence. Subsequently in 2008, restrictions were further eased to allow demonstrations by citizens to be held without a police permit.³ This reflected the Government’s receptivity to more diverse platforms for citizen views.⁴

The New Digital Imperative

With the advent of fast, ubiquitous internet access and a broad range of digital platforms, more Singaporeans began to go online to express their views on public issues. In 2014, it was estimated that mobile population and wireless

Effective public engagement can also increase mutual trust and shared ownership of policy outcomes.

broadband population penetration rates had reached 148% and 184% respectively, based on the total number of subscriptions versus total population.⁵ Each Singapore adult owned an average of 3.3 connected devices. Laptop and desktop computer users spent 4.7 hours and mobile device users spent 2.3 hours on the internet each day.⁶ Today, the internet has become an important channel for communication and engagement that no government can afford to ignore.

The rise of social media platforms,⁷ such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Tumblr and WordPress, has attracted large numbers of users to share content with each other, particularly a new generation of digital natives who have grown up with the internet.⁸ Social media platforms are also more likely to appeal to the Generation Y who grew up with the internet. For example, an Institute of Policy Studies Survey⁹ in 2010 revealed that Singaporeans aged 21 to 39 years old read more about politics on the internet, and trusted the internet as a source of political news slightly more than older people. They also tended to participate more in online political activities such as taking part in online political forums. Thus, as the Government seeks to interest Singaporeans in public issues, social media provides tremendous opportunities to extend the reach of engagement efforts, as well as to receive near-instantaneous feedback on its policies and services — that is, if public agencies are prepared for digital engagement.

The Public Service has shifted its overall digital strategy from a “government-to-you” approach to a “government-with-you” approach.

Several public sector-wide developments have arisen to support digital engagement efforts. In October

2006, the Feedback Unit was restructured as “Reaching Everyone for Active Citizenry @ Home” (REACH), and tasked with facilitating communication between Singaporeans and the Government through a variety of electronic channels. REACH expanded its social media platforms to include interactive discussion forums, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram; by 2014, it had received 27,140 pieces of online feedback, more than double of that received in 2009.¹⁰

The Public Service has also shifted its overall digital strategy from a “government-to-you” approach to a “government-with-you” approach — a move supported by the Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore (IDA)’s eGov2015 Masterplan.¹¹ Among the key thrusts of this transition towards a more collaborative government is to better connect citizens in ways that would allow the views and resources of citizens to be actively harnessed to improve policy outcomes. By the second half of 2016, two new agencies — the Info-communications Media Development Authority of Singapore (IMDA) and the Government Technology Organisation (GTO) — will be established to further digital transformation efforts and encourage the participation of citizens in the co-creation of public digital services.¹²

Successful Digital Public Engagement

While these whole-of-government efforts take root, individual agencies

have a vital part to play in ensuring the success of digital citizen engagement efforts. A number of elements are vital to this effort:

a. A robust social media policy

Besides taking steps to make websites more mobile-friendly to reflect the public's changing usage patterns, agencies need to decide which social media platforms they will adopt and the purposes they fulfil. A robust social media infrastructure includes clear guidelines on how the use of social media platforms fits into the agency's overall engagement strategy. For example, the plan should lay out how physical and digital platforms complement each

other, depending on the context, to broaden the agency's engagement reach. There should also be clear guidelines on when and how online incidents should be escalated, and how public comments should be moderated, especially if they remain anonymous, in line with each agency's code of conduct (also see box story on "Creating a Suitable Online Persona").

b. A proactive and citizen-centric mindset in every public officer

Public agencies should be proactive in public engagement. A citizen-centric mindset ought to be ingrained in every organisation and every public officer, whether they are involved

CREATING A SUITABLE ONLINE PERSONA

The Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) was recently lauded in *The Straits Times* for its creative posts that won Facebook fans. The agency had decided on a social media persona that would be witty, funny, informative, conversational, non-condescending in tone and extremely knowledgeable about life-saving techniques. SCDF's social media officers kept to this persona when engaging the public and updated SCDF's Facebook with interesting photos of officers on life-saving missions. The agency also advised its officers to treat the agency's Facebook as their own and honour what they post.¹

NOTE

1. "SCDF Wins Fans with Its Social Media Persona", *The Straits Times*, 14 February 2016, accessed 1 March 2015, <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/scdf-wins-fans-with-its-social-media-persona>.

GOVERNMENT-CITIZEN COLLABORATION USING SOCIAL PLATFORMS

OneService (<http://www.mnd.gov.sg/mso/mobile-about.htm>)

Jointly developed by the Municipal Services Office (MSO) and IDA, this award-winning mobile application gathers location-based public feedback on a variety of municipal issues (e.g., cleanliness, footpaths, animals in public places). Its map-based photo geo-tagging features help agencies to respond to and resolve issues quickly. Reported cases are also routed automatically to the appropriate public agencies for follow up.

Beeline (www.beeline.sg)

This LTA/IDA-developed mobile application helps commuters travelling to their workplaces. Through Beeline, the public can suggest bus services for specific locations — popular routes with sufficient crowd-sourced demand will trigger private bus operators to run these routes for a paid fare. Beeline also helps commuters pre-book a seat on the minibuses, which serve routes of about five stops in length.

A robust social media infrastructure includes clear guidelines on how the use of social media platforms fits into the agency's overall engagement strategy. Physical and digital platforms should complement each other, depending on the context, to broaden the agency's engagement reach.

in policy development or service delivery. To this end, many agencies are already working to resolve day-to-day issues together with citizens, using digital platforms that are based heavily on public input.

c. Cultivate long-term relationships with citizens

For public engagement to be effective, time and effort need to be invested to build a relationship between government and citizens on a long-term basis; it is not a matter of engaging the public only when a crisis happens. In the digital age, building rapport and trust with netizens become even more important because online chatter can blow up issues or change public perceptions of policies overnight — with consequences that spill over beyond the online realm. If trust and goodwill have been built up over time however, matters are less likely to get out of control when something

negative happens. In addition, it becomes easier to encourage active, constructive participation in consultation or collaboration efforts, if public agencies have a strong and deep relationship with the public. Leading by example, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has had four successful years of engaging with the public through his regularly updated Facebook page, which is followed by some 1 million netizens.¹³ Many have thanked him for his sincere sharing, and for helping them to better understand public policies.

d. Ensure public officers are ready for new roles in digital engagement

Engaging the public through social media platforms will also demand new roles and competencies. Besides being digital media savvy, social media analytics will become increasingly important. The private sector has a head start in analysing customer data from social media to enhance its product and service offerings. For example, the Australia and New

Zealand (ANZ) Banking Group have developed a goMoney mobile application, backed by analytics to receive insights on how to better streamline consumer experiences based on online banking behaviours.¹⁴ In the government sector, social media analytics could offer insights to spot important emerging patterns and needs. Available data will have to be integrated and analysed intelligently, both within and across individual agencies, in order to enable whole-of-government decision-making that can better serve the public.

e. Work more efficiently to respond promptly to digital feedback

While digital platforms can help to connect the Government to citizens on a 24-7 basis, public officers may not be able to respond to feedback and suggestions, nor reciprocate with solutions, quite as readily, since some matters have deeper policy implications that need to be deliberated. At the same time, the speed at which misinformation can spread through social media

“Public engagement is an ongoing intentional process for the government that aims to build relationships and, together with the public, produce better policies, services and outcomes for society.”

*“Public Engagement 101, Defining the Public Engagement Framework”,
PS21 Office, Public Service Division*

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT ONLINE

In September 2015, there were online rumours that the Government conducted cloud seeding operations to reduce the impact of haze for the Formula 1 race. The claims circulating on various online platforms also implied that the rain was harmful and urged people to avoid the chemically induced rain showers. Fortunately, the National Environment Agency was able to quickly debunk the misinformation.¹

NOTE

1. "NEA Debunks Online Rumours That Recent Rain Was Caused by Cloud Seeding to Clear Haze", *The Straits Times*, 17 September 2015, accessed 4 February 2016, <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/nea-debunks-online-rumours-that-recent-rain-was-caused-by-cloud-seeding-to-clear-haze>.

For public engagement to be effective, time and effort need to be invested to build a relationship between government and citizens on a long-term basis; it is not a matter of engaging the public only when a crisis happens.

platforms is such that agencies can be caught off guard, with little time to put together an appropriate and informed response. Public agencies must be alert to monitor online chatter at all times, and be prepared to work more efficiently and respond to netizens more quickly, while still ensuring that the information they provide is accurate and appropriately communicated.

Conclusion

The digital era has transformed the landscape for public engagement across all sectors. It presents many opportunities for the Government to better engage the public. However, digital forms of engagement need to be integrated with physical platforms, and judiciously managed in order to be inclusive and fulfil all the various objectives of public engagement and communication. Besides whole-of-government efforts, the Public Service must help individual agencies and officers to cultivate a citizen centric mindset, develop the desired capabilities and improve service standards for the new digital arena, so as to tap on the possibilities of social media as it continues to evolve. ✎

NOTES

1. Speech delivered at the Annual Public Service Leadership Dinner, 27 October 2015, accessed 4 February 2016, <http://www.psd.gov.sg/press-room/speeches/speech-by-mr-tharman-shanmugaratnam-deputy-prime-minister-and-coordinating-minister-for-economic-and-social-policies-at-the-public-service-leadership-dinner-1>.
2. National Library Board, "Keep Singapore Clean Campaign", accessed 4 February 2016, http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1160_2008-12-05.html.
3. Cheryl Sim, "Speakers' Corner", NLB Infopedia, accessed 19 February 2016, http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_515_2005-01-25.html.
4. Recent notable events held at Hong Lim Park include protest against the Population White Paper that drew more than 4,000 people in February 2013 and the CPF protest that attracted 3,000 attendees in September 2014. These protests helped to flag particular perspectives on issues close to citizens' hearts.
5. Ministry of Social and Family Development, "Singapore Social Statistics in Brief 2015", accessed 19 February 2016, <http://app.msf.gov.sg/Research-Room/Research-Statistics/Singapore-Social-Statistics-In-Brief>.
6. Simon Kemp, "Digital, Social & Mobile in 2015", accessed 4 February 2016, <http://wearesocial.sg/blog/2015/01/digital-social-mobile-2015>.
7. <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/social-media>
8. Generation Y were born between 1980 and 2000. More information from <http://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/what-makes-gen-y-tick>.
9. Tan Tarn How, Chung Siyoung and Zhang Weiyu, "Survey on Political Traits and Media Use. Singapore Youth: Different, but not that different" (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies, 2012), accessed 4 February 2016, http://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2013/07/Media-Survey-Summary_230511.pdf.
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OPINION

When the Government Goes Online

A veteran journalist and editor believes the government should rethink its strategy for communication and engaging online.

BY
BERTHA HENSON

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There are two worlds in Singapore.

The Singapore government is familiar with one world, in which the media consists of broadcast and print platforms. This is the world in which the Government remains the biggest voice in Singapore because of the symbiotic relationship between the public sector and traditional media. In this realm, institutional control over information and the management of opinion have been honed to a fine art over the years. But this world is shrinking, albeit at a slower pace than some observers like Bill Gates had envisaged.

The other world includes the internet, that ephemeral medium which is inhabited by anybody who has online access. This is an unfettered world that

the Government is uncomfortable, even inept, in navigating. The public sector has a much smaller voice here, drowned out by a cacophony of different views. Conventional forms of influence do not work as well in a sphere over which government has much less direct leverage, partly because of the multiple players involved, both internal and external. The Government's commitment to maintain a "light touch" in this arena makes it even harder to exert any fine control over this world.

The Government has been employing all the social media tools at its disposal to engage those who are more active online than offline. It has made official information easily available and has developed a myriad

of ways to make public services more accessible. What the Government is less good at is knowing how to “talk” to people online and persuading them to its point of view. While technologically flexible and efficient in disseminating information, it does so in the same voice that it applies to the traditional media realm and with the same expectations and assumptions. It forgets that there tend to be more cynical people online than offline.

Hard Truths about the Online Realm

If the Government wants to do a better job of “engaging” people online, it has to come to grips with a few realities online:

a. It does not have an effective middleman on the internet.

One of the advantages of a filter such as traditional media is that it makes official information manageable and easy to understand. Journalists are experts at telling stories attractively. Governments are not. A journalist or editor can help blunt a hectoring tone, add context to make information easier to understand, or soften gaffes. To put it bluntly, the professional news media can help protect a government from its own communications blunders. There is no such mechanism on the internet.

b. It lacks a large and vocal online fan base.

The Government has to acknowledge that when it comes to policy issues,

its fans online are silent bystanders, while its detractors are vocal. This is the nature of the beast and not likely to change anytime soon. The best thing the Government can do is to keep the broad middle ground from being affected by extreme adverse views, even while conceding that there might be some truth in dissent.

c. Missed — and mixed — messages.

Important messages may be lost or go awry if a particular “point of interest” takes centre stage, distracting from the core issues. Worse, they may be misinterpreted and amplified. This means the Government has to react quickly because it takes just a few minutes for something to go viral. This is in contrast to dealing with traditional media, where there is time to negotiate or formulate an appropriate response.

d. Communications work different online.

What and how the Government communicates online must be different from what it does offline. While the traditional media can be relied on, in the main, for appropriate outcomes to government-related news, this simply cannot be guaranteed on the internet. Even traditional media has realised that it cannot use the online medium as a duplicate of its original print or broadcast content. Instead, they have developed a dual

approach to news, in the way news content is curated and prioritised online versus offline. The mainstream media has tried to appeal to online readers by catering to their preference for bite-sized news, controversy, colour stories, as well as providing platforms for comment. They know this is a different crowd.

What the Government is less good at is knowing how to “talk” to people online and persuading them to its point of view. While technologically flexible and efficient in disseminating information, it does so in the same voice that it applies to the traditional media realm and with the same expectations and assumptions.

The Singapore public sector’s use of the internet generally suggests a confusion of aims. What are the key online objectives of the various agencies? Other than providing an online “information dump”, do the agencies want to be “liked” by the public, or seen as authoritative? Is it a pro-active or a reactive approach to engagement? Are there attempts to nurture friendly community relations? With which segments of the public?

Social media cannot do everything — nor is it good for every agency to cultivate an “engaging” image. Technical

agencies such as the Law and Finance ministries, for example, should avoid being too free with its public comments and should stay above the fray. On the other hand, an effective social media presence is more important for people-centric agencies such as the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Manpower, or the Housing and Development Board, which have a stronger public-facing mandate and have to demonstrate empathy for the common man.

Public Agencies and Social Media — Points to Consider

Several key questions should form the basis of any government agency’s social media policy:

- a. If the key objective is to provide information, then social media which directs people to appropriate information on the agency website should suffice.
- b. If the key aim is engagement, be clear about the image the agency wants to project, because this will decide the tone of communications. Other considerations include:
 - *Where* this engagement should take place. Generally, agencies should engage only on home territory (e.g., their own website or Facebook page) where control is direct.

The Singapore Civil Defence Force, with its approachable, light-hearted social media presence, seems to understand that its Facebook page is like a person, with a personality that it wants to brand.

However, while humour is usually appealing to the online community, it may not always be the image that public agencies want for themselves.

One suggestion: Agencies that deal with the public in a big way may want to focus on using its social media to offer user-friendly help or guides.

These need not only be about new programmes. The online crowd has a short memory and old news may be passed off as new, wittingly or unwittingly. For example, changes to PSLE grading made the rounds recently despite it being old news — the Ministry of Education could have intervened online.

There is a quick way for agencies to do this: they could modify their Frequently Asked Questions online to address the public's trending interest in these old questions or policies.

More technical agencies that deal with economics or the law could use social media to answer questions by reprising what has already been said by their principals and leaders.

- *What* issues should NOT be discussed at all because putting a foot wrong would have far-reaching consequences.
 - *Who* to engage, because there are always some people who are best ignored.
 - *When* to engage or respond to comments, which also involves determining the acceptable level of tolerance.
 - *How* to engage. For example, would the agency want to respond to an issue online, or offline, or both? Again, the two worlds are quite distinct.
- c. If the agency considers engagement an important part of policy, then attention must be paid to the qualities of people in its social media team and the level of empowerment they enjoy.

Reaching Out

Government agencies usually depend on the mainstream media to broadcast official news and information online while they themselves direct the online community

The Singapore Armed Forces may be the public agency with the best online traction. One reason is that it appears to have a diverse range of commentators and authentic interaction on its Facebook page.

There are different ways to cultivate feedback and discussion. For example, the National Environment Agency could host an active page for animal lovers; the Urban Redevelopment Authority could start one for those who believe in preserving heritage. Agencies could also offer an official point person for informal public groups to turn to for queries or background information.

to the original material. In the haste to upload fresh information online, it is common for the media to make mistakes. This should be corrected as quickly as possible before it reaches too many people. Because traditional media can be reluctant to publicise errors online, agencies should consider telling their readers that the earlier draft was incorrect, especially if the mistake was grievous.

Here are three suggestions:

a. *Reiterate your own key messages*

Instead of re-directing people, agencies might want to consider putting up three key points of its message on its own social media platforms before pointing readers to the fuller mainstream media stories.

b. *Engage proactively, not reactively*

Agencies, especially those on the public frontline, might also want to go into specific online groups to sense public queries or concerns

and then respond to them quickly. They should not wait for something to go viral and for the news media to pick it up before coming forward with a response. In fact, such proactive engagement, especially when individuals complain of day-to-day dealings with agencies, should be a matter of course — it goes a long way for branding, and is already the practice in the private sector.

c. *Get to know your community voices in person*

Consider calling for periodic offline engagements (e.g., focus groups or tea sessions) with those who comment on agencies' areas of interest. There are informal interest or lobby groups online which can make good partners in this regard. These individuals will include detractors that the Government will never be able to win over. More often, however, they would be happy to be engaged in further dialogue.

Managing Online Opinion

It is clear to everyone that the internet is a powerful tool which can influence opinion on issues. But the online world does not work with offline rules, not even rules of sub judice. Major players might do the responsible thing but it cannot be said to be the same for individuals and online communities who do not even know the rules. The suicide of 14-year Benjamin Lim is a recent case in point. Despite more than 20 articles and a huge online uproar that spilled offline, the official decision was to stay quiet, ostensibly because a coroner's inquiry will be taking place. The Government may have done better to respond to misinformation quickly rather than hope for the issue to die down — which it did not.

Media regulations and laws should be applied sparingly to issues that arise in the online realm, as they can often backfire, leading to accusations that the Government is being heavy-handed without doing much lasting good. The suspension of the website The Real Singapore¹ has only led to the setting up of similar clones. The attempt to use harassment laws on The Online Citizen backfired when the courts ruled that such protection from harassment is intended for individuals and not entities, in much the same way as entities cannot sue for libel.²

Some agencies have commissioned outside agencies to “seed” messages or to rebut information and opinion online.

A better strategy might be for the Government to re-calibrate its attitude towards online citizens and online views:

- a. **Be as transparent with information as possible.** It is easier to rebut with additional information instead of mere assertions and assurances. Where there is an information vacuum, someone will fill it, sometimes with garbage. It is true that too much information is indigestible, but it has to be available to those who want the details and to give the Government a fair shake. It is more helpful to public institutions if outsiders reiterate their point of view or make counterarguments on their behalf.
- b. **Always acknowledge different views** rather than castigate those who hold them as “keyboard warriors”. Being specific about the target of a rebuttal is far more

The online world does not work with offline rules. Media regulations and laws should be applied sparingly to issues that arise in the online realm, as they can often backfire, leading to accusations that the Government is being heavy-handed without doing much lasting good.

politic than tarring everyone with the same brush, which turns off even those who support the Government's point of view.

Throwing weight or pulling rank does not work on the internet. The Government cannot control internet chatter, it can only hope to be part of it.

- c. **Have a savvy social media team** with members who are good with language, possess a healthy sense of humour and are in touch with internet culture. It will help agencies avoid public relations gaffes (such as a recent misleading picture caption

of a junior minister reclining on a bed in a foreign worker dormitory). More importantly, the team should be empowered to post online without having to refer every post up the hierarchy for vetting, on as wide a range of relevant issues as possible.

The Government will have to get used to the intolerant, irreverent attitude on the internet where conspiracy theories, baseless accusations, sweeping generalisations and cheap shots are rife. They have always been present — technology has merely brought them out into the open. Throwing weight or pulling rank does not work on the internet. The Government cannot control internet chatter, it can only hope to be part of it. ✂

NOTES

1. "Socio-political Site The Real Singapore Taken Down after MDA Suspends Editors' Licence", *The Straits Times*, 3 May 2015, <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/socio-political-site-the-real-singapore-taken-down-after-mda-suspends-editors-licence>.
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Communicating to Our Pioneer Generation

The launch of the Pioneer Generation Package demonstrated new ways to understand, inform, engage and serve Singaporeans on the ground.

BY
LAI SZU HAO

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Looking after Our Founding Generation

Singapore's sweeping \$8 billion Pioneer Generation Package (PGP),¹ announced in early 2014, represents a ground-breaking public initiative to honour a generation — some 450,000 citizens aged 65 or older² — that had built up the nation in its earliest years, and to provide for their healthcare needs in their senior years. Since consultations and dialogues³ had highlighted clearly that the cost of healthcare was the prime concern of older Singaporeans and their families,⁴ the Government recognised that senior citizens should be informed about the package so that they can benefit fully from it. It also saw that this would require a comprehensive communication effort beyond the usual media and publicity channels. Singaporeans in the '65 and older' age group have varying levels of education and literacy, and many of them do not access news media regularly. Given the intricate PGP framework, it might be difficult for some seniors to absorb all the relevant policy details that might apply to them. Reaching out to the pioneers and their caregivers to

effectively explain the benefits would be critical to the programme's objective of alleviating long-standing concerns about the cost of healthcare and to provide peace of mind.

Communication Objectives In Sync with Policy Goals

While the PGP is comprehensive, it is also complex in design, affecting different individuals differently depending on their individual circumstances. This made communication a challenge: not only did overall publicity about the PGP need to be simplified, but there was also a need to customise the communication to specific audiences. Many Singaporeans already found the existing healthcare financing and assistance schemes hard to understand.⁵ The PGP involves multiple tiers of subsidy that depend on the complexity of the presenting disease and whether it would be covered by other existing schemes. Such intricacies are not only difficult to explain but are also dependent on individual contexts.

In communicating the PGP, it was imperative to ensure that the key messages were structured and simple to understand, yet meaningful enough to resonate with the different target groups, in order to provide assurance that healthcare costs would become more affordable. To achieve this, the strategy for communicating the PGP incorporated several elements that were rolled out in stages.

While the PGP is comprehensive, it is also complex in design, affecting different individuals differently depending on their individual circumstances.

Understand the pioneer generation more deeply

At the early stage of implementing the PGP, there was a need to understand how the pioneers felt about the package. Research was conducted to better understand the target audience and to test effectiveness of different communication strategies, as well as aid in the design of publicity materials. For instance, it was found that the elderly preferred to receive something tangible — this led to the Ministry of Health developing a Pioneer Generation Welcome Package, presented in the form of a gift pack with a “Thank You” note penned by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. This reinforced the PGP’s intention of

expressing appreciation and respect in a personal way, which would not have been conveyed by conventional mailers.

Raise awareness and offer assurance

The Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI), which spearheaded above-the-line publicity efforts, realised it could be counter-productive to detail the complex financial technicalities of the PGP from the outset. As such, it decided to introduce the subject to pioneers with the message that the Government cares and will help them to lower their healthcare costs. The initial phase of the communication campaign (from the PGP’s announcement to just before its benefits were implemented) focused

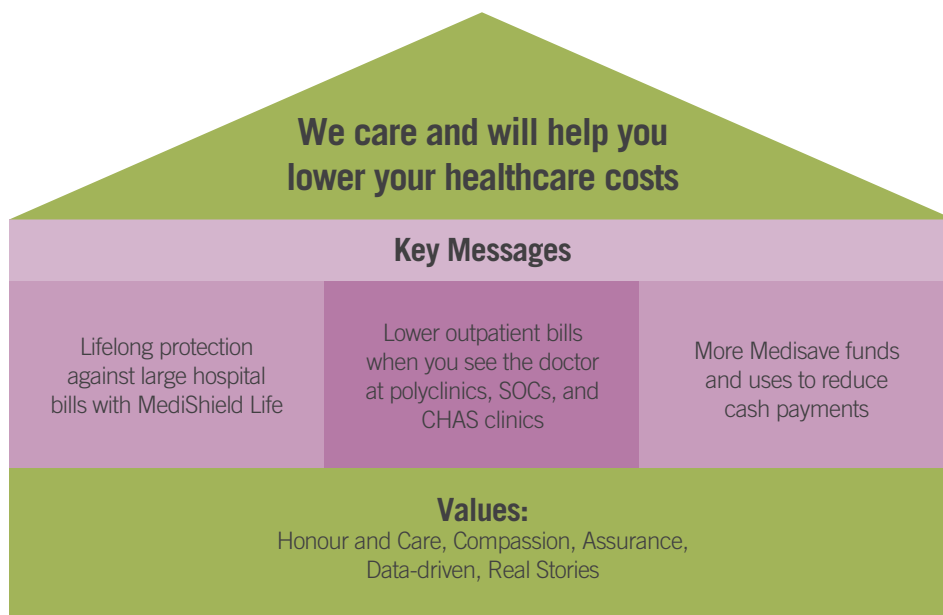


Figure 1. Message Map for the Pioneer Generation Package
(Source: Ministry of Communications and Information)

not just on thanking and honouring pioneers for their past contributions, but also on raising basic awareness of the package and its assurances about reducing healthcare expenses. To this end, the tagline “**More help in healthcare, less worries for life**” was created. Although this tagline did not appear on all publicity collaterals, it set the basic tone and guided the development of content across various media platforms (see Figure 1 on page 31).

As different publicity initiatives were rolled out, the pioneers’ levels of awareness and assurance were monitored to make sure the communication was having its desired effect. Based on a survey of pioneers conducted by the Ministry of Finance (MOF), awareness of PGP rose significantly from 65% to 95% from July to September 2014 (see Figure 2). Another survey conducted by MCI during the same period also indicated that the majority of pioneers felt

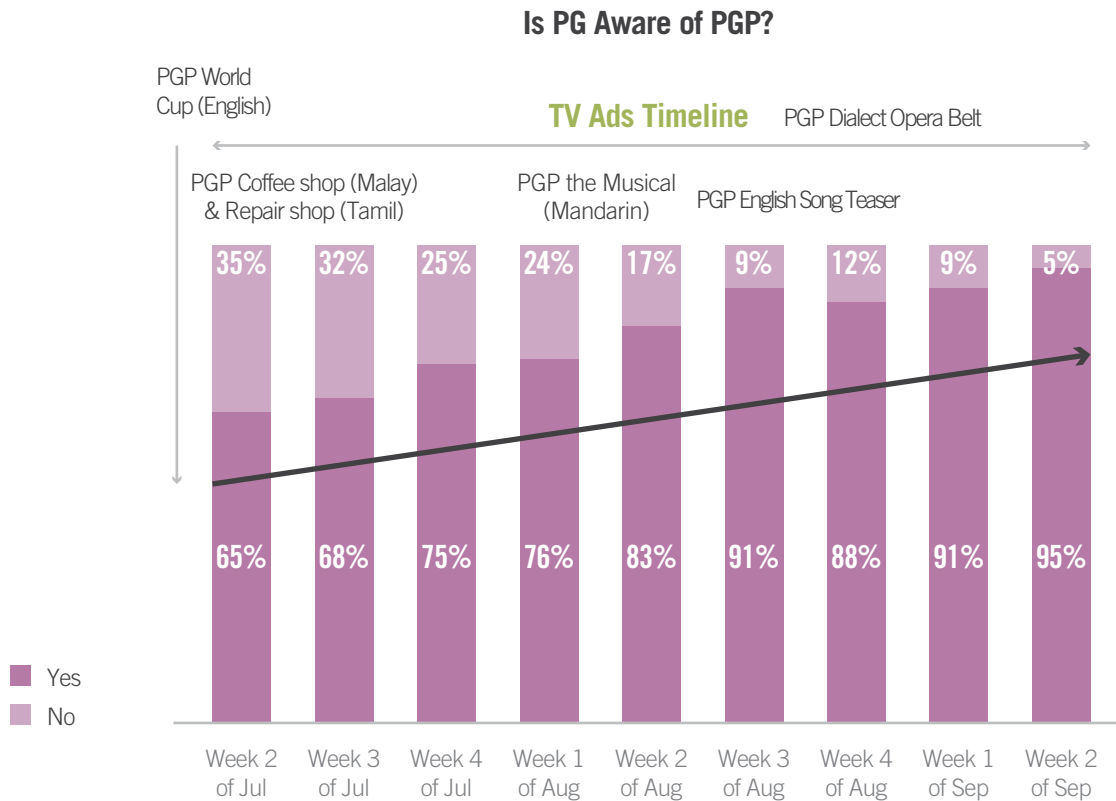


Figure 2. Ministry of Finance's Pioneer Generation Baseline Survey, July to September 2014
(Source: Ministry of Finance)

assured and recognised, and perceived that the Government was sincere in its effort to honour them.

Cultivate trust with a personal touch

In August 2014, the Pioneer Generation Office (PGO)⁶ was established to lead personalised, last-mile communication and outreach. They were tasked to engage individual pioneers and help them to understand the PGP's complex benefits. Using data analytics, Pioneer Generation Ambassadors (PGAs) were judiciously deployed to visit pioneer households, armed with essential information such as each pioneer's name, address, age and spoken language. PGAs were matched to pioneers based on the language spoken, and deployed first to precincts with a higher concentration of pioneers with greater intervention needs. It was not uncommon, in the course of these house visits, for pioneers to open up to PGAs about a wide variety of issues of concern to them, ranging from social welfare to municipal matters. These interactions helped to foster trust between the PGAs and the pioneers. Indeed, the PGA scheme could yield useful insights on the local needs of

pioneers, volunteer resource management and, more importantly, building social capital through volunteerism.

Innovations in Public Communication

For any public communication campaign to be effective, stakeholders' understanding of the key issues has to be assessed, so that appropriate follow-up strategies can be formulated to better explain the policies at hand. This is especially vital for target audiences such as the pioneers, who are harder to reach for a variety of reasons, including age, literacy and health factors. Furthermore, the pioneer generation is not a homogenous group: communication cannot adopt a one-size-fits-all approach. Consequently, the level of customised content produced by public agencies to communicate PGP was unprecedented. This ranged from modifying the language of the advertisements to tweaking content to suit each target subgroup. For instance, the videos produced depicted familiar scenarios that seniors of specific ethnic and language groups could identify with. Celebrities from the respective ethnic communities were also featured prominently in newspaper advertorials

For any public communication campaign to be effective, stakeholders' understanding of the key issues has to be assessed, so that appropriate follow-up strategies can be formulated.

REVERTING TO VERNACULAR LANGUAGES FOR COMMUNICATION

Since the launch of the Speak Mandarin Campaign in 1979, government agencies in Singapore have not used dialects to explain public policies. Indeed, there have been restrictions placed on the use of Chinese dialects on free-to-air broadcast channels and television programmes, in order to encourage use of Mandarin within the Chinese community.

This long-standing moratorium on the use of dialects was waived for the PGP campaign, because the use of vernacular and patois was considered vital in communicating with the target audience of seniors, who were often reliant on these vernacular tongues in daily life.

to attract their attention and hold their interest.

In a further creative effort to address the many concerns of pioneers and their caregivers, an 8-episode Mandarin drama serial — A Blessed Life (吉人天相 *jírén tiānxiàng*) — was commissioned to portray the different personal, physical and financial issues that pioneers face, along with the corresponding PGP provisions that could help. This programme complemented the door-to-door outreach by PGAs, who then explained the PGP benefits in more detail and addressed any residual information gaps or concerns they might have.

Test results showed that the videos in the vernacular languages resonated best with the pioneers, offering a sense of familiarity and enabling them to better digest the information.

Different ways of presenting a piece of information can evoke different emotional responses. The PGO tested different headlines, images and videos designed to create awareness of PGP's benefits. Test results showed that the videos in the Mandarin, Malay, Tamil and Chinese dialects resonated best with the pioneers, offering a sense of familiarity and enabling them to better digest the information. Some PGP videos were also tested with the PGAs — considered a group on the ground keenly aware of the pioneers' preferences — to get a sense of how the messages might be received by their target audience.

Enhancing Engagement through Citizen-centred Service

By mobilising nearly 3,000 volunteers as PGAs to facilitate last-mile communication, a new format of citizen engagement, outreach and service was developed. Not

only had the PGO and its Ambassadors fulfilled a mandate to communicate the PGP, but they managed, in the process, to connect elderly Singaporeans with relevant agencies to address many of their concerns unrelated to the PGP itself, by acting as:

- a. **Communicators.** The PGAs explained the PGP in simple ways to the pioneers and their caregivers to help them appreciate the policy intent and fully utilise the benefits. Wherever possible, the PGAs also often helped to clarify misperceptions which the pioneers had about other government policies.
- b. **Connectors.** The PGAs linked the pioneers, especially those who were not socially active, to community activities. During interactions, the PGAs also found out more about the pioneers' views on policies, service gaps and local needs; these insights were then channelled to policy owners to tighten service delivery and sharpen communication messages.
- c. **Navigators.** Many pioneers do not benefit from government schemes because they (or their caregivers) lack awareness and confidence in navigating the system, or have been frustrated by previous attempts. The PGAs assisted such applications or made referrals to the appropriate agencies.

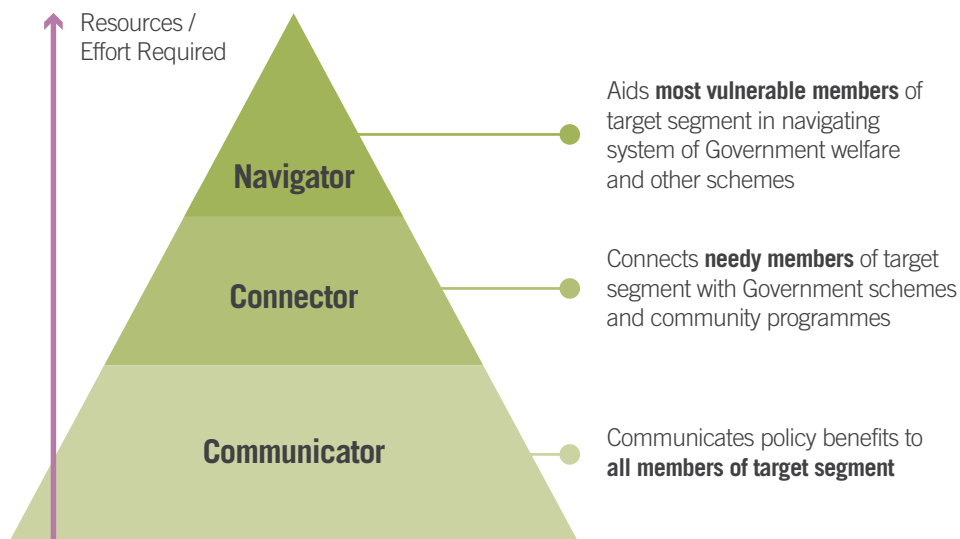


Figure 3. Pioneer Generation Ambassadors: The Roles that Evolved to Fill Gaps
(Source: Pioneer Generation Office)

The many efforts made for the PGP communication campaign has led to a deeper overall understanding of how to reach out to elderly Singaporeans and explain government policies to them. It has also generated greater awareness of the role of message-testing in enhancing citizen-centric communication in general. While the various media platforms are instrumental in promoting policy awareness, a significant number of the elderly do not access mainstream media. Here, the campaign has allowed the Government to appreciate the value of face-to-face engagement as part of the

last-mile communication efforts vital for policy success. Effective, personalised engagement goes beyond information dissemination to help intended groups understand the relevance of policies to their well-being and how they can optimise the use of policy features given their individual circumstances.

The PGP communication and outreach efforts have improved the Government's approach to ground engagement; in the process, they have also enhanced public service delivery, strengthened citizen-centricity, and re-ignited community networks. The data and experience gleaned from this important initiative will help future efforts to understand, engage and serve citizens, as well as strengthen the planning of local programmes, and further improve last-mile service delivery and communication. ✨

The campaign has allowed the Government to appreciate the value of face-to-face engagement as part of the last-mile communication efforts vital for policy success.

NOTES

1. For more information, refer to www.pioneers.sg.
2. The beneficiaries must either be born in Singapore or have become citizens before 31 December 1986.
3. For instance, the Ministry of Health started dialogues on healthcare as part of *Our Singapore Conversation* as early as February 2013. The dialogue themes were aligned with the overarching messages of accessibility, affordability and quality of care in the Healthcare 2020 Masterplan.
4. The perceived inability to cope with rising healthcare costs had been highlighted in public discourse in recent years. A survey conducted by Mindshare (a global media and marketing services company) in 2012 showed that 72% of the 2000-odd respondents agreed with the statement "We cannot afford to get sick these days due to the high medical costs". (See Joyce Hooi, "Singapore's Emigration Conundrum", *The Business Times*, 6 October 2012).
5. The Singapore system may appear complicated when compared with universal healthcare coverage plans in other parts of the world, where no co-payment or a fixed co-payment is required. For instance, in Australia, the co-payment for each visit to the general practitioner is fixed at A\$7, capped at A\$70 a year for concessional patients.
6. The PGO was set up to gather and train a group of volunteers called Pioneer Generation Ambassadors. It was funded by the Ministry of Finance but housed under the People's Association for ease of operation.



OPINION

Public Communication and Engagement in China: Lessons for Singapore

The Chinese government is exploring new media strategies to engage a public more willing and able to express themselves online.

BY
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AND

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Introduction

It is natural for a more educated populace in a maturing society to want to play a more assertive role in public decision-making. To engender trust and retain legitimacy in these circumstances, a government has to engage with its people in a different way: top-down, one-way communication must evolve into a more reciprocal, two-way engagement between state and society.

Singapore has studied many models of public engagement by governments

in developed countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia. While these societies share Singapore's Westminster model of governance, they have a long tradition as liberal democracies with active citizen participation in political discourse.

On the other hand, China's public engagement approaches are less well understood. Yet, China offers a relevant model for Singapore to examine: there are some common features in the two countries' governance traditions,

including long-term single party rule and a government that has erstwhile dominated public discourse. China, like Singapore, has also witnessed a relatively recent expansion of channels for citizens and civil society to participate in public discourse, along with a proliferation of non-governmental organisations that are becoming more vocal and active. How does the Chinese government communicate with and obtain feedback from its huge and diverse population — rural and urban, vulnerable and affluent, among other disparities — whose needs and demands differ so vastly? How does the Chinese government get its messages across despite the proliferation of voices, often critical, which have been enabled by the internet and social media?

China's Evolving State-Society Relationship

Western media tends to characterise the state-society relationship in China as akin to that of oppressor and oppressed. Yet this is hardly borne out by the reality of modern China. The internet has opened up new worlds of information to Chinese citizens who previously subsisted on a diet of state-controlled media. It has also satisfied an urgent social need, providing a channel for people to connect and speak up against perceived social injustices. The Chinese government has adapted by shifting the boundaries of acceptable public discourse,

and co-opting new technologies to meet its own objectives: to shape its own image, improve service delivery and even monitor local officials. As part of its image-building, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has eschewed depictions of its role as being based on 'control' (控制 *kòngzhì*), in favour of characterisations such as 'management' (管理 *guǎnlǐ*) or 'guidance' (指导 *zhǐdǎo*).¹

Prompted in part by the strong anti-establishment culture on the internet, the government invested significant effort to develop its online communication capability.

Indeed, the CCP seems to have succeeded in marketing its style of governance, not only to the older generation or peasant folk, but “even to its large population of globalised, urbanised, ICT-savvy youth”.²

In enacting this shift in stance, China's ruling CCP has exhibited a sophisticated grasp of political communication and public engagement strategies. While China's model of public engagement is unique, and the result of an equally unique government responding to its changing political and social environment, it may yet offer instructive lessons as it seeks to engage more effectively with citizens and stakeholders.

Strategies for Communication and Engagement

Use of Social Media as a Means of Outreach

While China maintains tight control over the communication of its ideology and image, including wielding internet restrictions such as the “Great Firewall” that filters out undesirable content, one prominent development in China’s model of public engagement is how the government has embraced the internet and social media. Prompted in part by the strong anti-establishment culture on the internet, the government invested significant effort to develop its online communication capability.

The Chinese government has facilitated the development of alternative platforms such as Weibo and WeChat where it can exercise far greater control over the content and remove unfavourable messages if required.

Chinese President Xi Jinping experimented with crafting his online persona as one who is down-to-earth and sympathetic to the concerns of the average Chinese citizen. When he visited a popular eatery in Beijing, an influential internet commentator “coincidentally” ran into the President and posted, on Weibo, images of Xi Jinping queuing

up at the eatery, paying for his food and sitting down to eat with other customers. Within minutes, official media outlets including Xinhua and CCTV reposted on their platforms and the image of China’s top leader personally queuing up at an eatery started spreading on China’s social media. Xi’s publicity campaign generated positive public responses on the Chinese internet.

Various organisations within the Chinese government have also employed social media to enhance their public image. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs started a Weibo account in 2011 under the user identity of “Foreign Affairs Elves” (外交小灵通 *wàijiāo xiǎo língtōng*). Within three years, the account had gained 7.5 million fans. Through the use of lively language in its interaction with online followers, it has also improved the ministry’s traditionally stodgy, aloof image.³

In Singapore, public communications have extended to the internet and social media, with most political leaders and agencies using Facebook to provide timely and visual updates on their programmes and activities. Beyond this, government organisations can take a leaf from China’s success stories by humanising communications with the public, by adopting a less officious tone or making the extra effort to show its officials interacting and working with members of the public and other stakeholders.

Encouraging Citizen Participation and Engagement

Facilitating greater civic participation not only provides channels for citizens to contribute their ideas and expertise, but also creates opportunities to build relationships between the government and its stakeholders and people. The Singapore government recognises this: within just five years, it has launched massive engagement efforts including Our Singapore Conversation and SG Future Engagement. These have been useful avenues for participants to share their aspirations and ideas.

However, where civic advocacy pertains to issues that require difficult trade-offs, the result of the government's engagement efforts has not been an unequivocal success. In recent years, there have been active lobbying for environmental and heritage conservation in Chek Jawa and Bukit Brown, as well as advocacy of animal rights and migrant worker rights. Such civic activism is on the rise, and is a reflection of the Singaporean public's greater assertiveness. In such instances, China's model of Deliberative Polling offers useful lessons.

Deliberative Polling involves recruiting a representative sample of participants (demographically, as well as those representing different sides of the debate), early provision of information, and facilitated sessions for the group to come together to discuss

different points of view. When well designed and implemented, as in the case of the annual budgetary discussion at Wenling City in Zhejiang Province, participants stand to gain knowledge about the policy choices and issues at hand, while allowing them and the wider public witnessing the process to see beyond each group's narrow interests. More importantly, it also allows the government to show its responsiveness to public interests, and enables citizens to voice their views in a context of mutual respect.

Even as the Chinese government adopts tight monitoring and interventionist measures, including the routine filtering of internet content to discourage certain discussion threads, it knows that netizens are becoming increasingly sophisticated and creative at getting around such measures.

Recalibrating the State-Society Relationship

Today, the Chinese government blocks popular foreign websites such as Google, YouTube and Facebook, and routinely shuts down Virtual Private Network services to prevent people from circumventing these controls. In their place, the Chinese government has facilitated the development of

alternative platforms such as Weibo and WeChat where it can exercise far greater control over the content and remove unfavourable messages if required. Singapore, whose economic success rests on being an open global city, cannot afford to take such measures, nor does Singapore have the population size to support the development of domestic social media alternatives.

Yet even as the Chinese government adopts tight monitoring and interventionist measures, including the routine filtering of internet content to discourage certain discussion threads, it knows that netizens are becoming increasingly sophisticated and creative at getting around such measures, for example using homonyms in place of phrases that might be filtered by the authorities. While the government has been resolute in quelling discussions that directly challenge its legitimacy or that incite social disturbances, it has been relatively tolerant of criticisms of the government or its policies, which abound on the internet and social media.

The government realises that the internet can be harnessed in its favour, to better understand the people's sentiments

in order to meet their legitimate needs. They have been open to suggestions to improve public administration and have been keen to demonstrate responsiveness on issues at the top of people's minds, for example, corruption, environmental pollution, and food safety. Paradoxically, the unfettered voicing of public opinion has the potential to undermine the stability of the Party's rule, and the CCP does not hesitate to deal with these in a heavy-handed way when its security is threatened.

There is realisation though that suppression of internet voices will ultimately be unhelpful as this would not only undermine its image and credibility, but also cause the government to lose an important channel to understand public sentiment. In gist, both state and society use the internet as a tool to expand their respective spheres of influence; the Chinese government realises that this is not a zero-sum game.

Singapore has likewise become more sophisticated in our attitude towards, and use of, the internet. Singapore has been using technology to conduct sentiment analyses of internet and social media content to understand

Both state and society use the internet as a tool to expand their respective spheres of influence; the Chinese government realises that this is not a zero-sum game.

people's responses to various policies and programmes. This allows the government to gauge understanding (or lack thereof) of national issues, and respond accordingly. At the same time, the internet occasionally becomes a forum for vitriol, rumours and untruths

to spread. While regulation is one possible response, it may eventually be more effective and sustainable to encourage the development of a more civil and responsible internet space that allows for meaningful dialogue to take place. 

NOTES

1. Such a stance, however, is possible only if the Party feels secure, which in turn is derived from a feeling that the government has achieved legitimacy. A state that is insecure is more wont to adopt draconian measures.
2. Anne-Marie Brady, ed., *China's Thought Management* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2012).
3. Zhou Zhaocheng, "The Role of Social Media in China's Political Communication", in *China's Socio-Political Reforms: Evolutionary or Revolutionary?* (Singapore: Civil Service College, 2015): 95–111.



The Challenge of Public Communications

BOOK DETAILS

Speechless: A Year in My Father's Business

By James Button

Melbourne University Press, 2012 (version reviewed; updated edition published August 2013); 256 pp.

REVIEWED BY

VERNIE OLIVEIRO

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In an episode of the BBC television series *The Thick of It*, a Minister is tasked with announcing to a classroom of teenagers a new policy encouraging young people to develop mobile phone apps. The problem is twofold: first, the Minister does not know the policy — it was developed by the government's coalition partners — and second, the Minister is something of a Luddite who cannot tell the difference between “downloading” and “uploading”. Predictably, the announcement is a disaster. The Minister stutters and stumbles through his speech, he flubs the question-and-answer portion of the event and, flustered, commits a faux pas for which he now has to publicly make amends. The Junior Minister, seizing the opportunity, disparages his superior and shows off his own grasp

of the policy details. The Minister, in turn, is ambushed by questions from the press. In the end, the Prime Minister moves to contain the damage by axing the policy entirely.¹

Not a few politicians and their aides, whether fictional or real, have learned that bad communications can circumscribe an otherwise good policy. New public servants used to be told that “policy is implementation”. With an increasingly media-saturated and politicised public sphere, policymakers might become more acquainted with a new maxim: policy is also communication. James Button's *Speechless: A Year in My Father's Business*, should come highly recommended to any public servant who wants to understand political communications. The book is both a behind-the-scenes glimpse of

speechwriting in the Australian Public Service as well as a brief micro-history of the Australian Labour Party (ALP), told from the perspective of a son of a former ALP Minister.

Button imparts insights that might prove useful to anyone new to the field of political communications. “Know your audience” is a key point of note — speeches need to speak to the concerns of audiences, avoid offending them and even, as a veteran political speechwriter counsels Button, “tell people something about themselves they had not thought of before”. Another might be to make sure that you can “hear the voice” of your client, and write using the vocabulary, metaphors and other turns of speech that come naturally to the speaker. “Be well read” might be a third. Political speechwriting almost always involves extensive research work, and speechwriters need to be able to draw on a vast array of material — facts, personal stories, historical narratives, imagery and metaphors — to effectively convey what they mean.

Speechless also describes the many communications challenges that policymakers might face today. Among these are the financial constraints that prevent media organisations from covering important stories well, the increasing scepticism of the public, and the 24-hour news cycle that encourages reactive rather than creative policymaking. These challenges are compounded, Button suggests, by the

erosion of “informal contact between journalists, ministers and advisers”; journalists, rather than enjoying conversations with public servants, now only get “scripted briefings”. He laments that the very people who are often most knowledgeable about policy and who can provide context that might illuminate public understanding of issues are also the least likely to share their knowledge in the public sphere. Button suggests that this contributes to a general lack of understanding about the work of bureaucracies.

Perhaps more illuminating are the lessons that Button learns through working for former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. Rudd believed that a good speech did not just communicate information about a policy, it also fit said policy into “the government’s core narrative”. Crucially, we see how important it is that politicians trust the public servants who bear the responsibility — and enjoy the privilege — of writing speeches. Button describes how Rudd, in

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addition to the busy work of governing, conscientiously edited the many drafts of speeches he was sent. Unwilling to sacrifice control, Rudd often stayed up late into the night working on speeches and, on one occasion, junked a speech and rewrote it on the flight to the event. Besides the duplicative inefficiencies this created, it also sapped morale; Button confesses: “I was writing looking over my shoulder. That doesn’t work”.

With an increasingly diverse population, it no longer makes practical sense to talk of a singular, monolithic “public”, or act as if a “silent majority” exists with views somehow distinct from the range of opinions already being expressed in public.

Speechless highlights some tensions between the ideals of political communication and the realities of working in public service. In dealing with these, Button is more descriptive than prescriptive — he leaves it to the reader to determine how they might, in their own contexts, resolve some of these issues. For instance, he acknowledges the need for speechwriters to “hear the voice” of their ministers. Button mentions reading the work of Peggy Noonan who wrote speeches for US Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush. She writes, in *On Speaking Well* (Regan Books, 1998),

that speechwriters “have to literally be close to someone to get his sound”, that they “have to be exposed to him, sit in his office and hear him talk ... hear him answer the phone”. Yet, elected leaders are invariably very busy people. This, and the nature of their office, tends to isolate them not just from the public, but also from those who work for them. Similarly, speechwriters might hope that their literary flourishes survive the interventions of bureaucrats who are sticklers for accuracy and nuance. A stronger personality in a different political system, such as Noonan in the White House, might have insisted on being right beside the President and would have argued strenuously with interfering bureaucrats. Button can only wonder if he should have been more assertive with his Prime Minister.

Button recounts Noonan’s observations about how an increased emphasis on profit-making in media has contributed to the growing prevalence of sound bites. It seems that one constant challenge of political communication is the need for the officers involved to continuously adapt to changing media landscapes. Singapore’s information officers are, in turn, learning to both communicate with a public that tunes into multiple channels for information and work in an environment which no longer allows the Government to control the public agenda. They will need to ensure the substantial quality and consistency of their communications amid diverse

media, particularly given increasingly sceptical public demands for more timely, accurate and meaningful information. There may be a need for the Government to better anticipate and prepare for future developments in media.

Button's advice for speechwriters to know their audience seems particularly wise in the Singapore context. With an increasingly diverse population, it no longer makes practical sense to talk of a singular, monolithic "public", or act as if a "silent majority" exists with views somehow distinct from the range of opinions already being expressed in public. The Government arguably needs to become more sophisticated in their understanding of the hopes, fears and beliefs of diverse audiences, and how best to communicate with them. Latterly, the Government is also learning that while facts and figures are important, citizens also care deeply about the things that only a narrative can deliver — direction, values and the answers that can help people identify with the Government's programme.

Some questions linger for those interested in the challenges of political communication in Singapore. Can impartial career public servants who

While facts and figures are important, citizens also care deeply about the things that only a narrative can deliver — direction, values and the answers that can help people identify with the Government's programme.

oversee government communications "care" about policies and politicians the same way as partisan speechwriters who are more vested in parties, ideologies or personalities? In fitting policy into narrative, how should public officers balance or differentiate between the political imperative to persuade and the ethical imperative to inform? Does the Singapore Public Service need dedicated speechwriters? If so, what institutional adaptations and career paths might be needed to afford speechwriters enough access to "hear the voice" of those for whom they write? Finally, given Button's (and Noonan's) suggestion that good communications are based upon excellent research and sense-making, what capacities does the Singapore Public Service need to develop in these areas in order to get political communications right? ✂

NOTE

1. BBC, "The Thick of It", Series 4 Episode 1, 8 September 2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/proginfo/2012/37/The-Thick-of-It.html>.



OPINION

Narratives and the Institutional Imagination

Political scientist Catherine Fieschi argues that every country needs a good tale to help it adapt to change while maintaining a sense of collective identity.

BY
CATHERINE FIESCHI

Catherine Fieschi is the Founder and Executive Director of Counterpoint, a London-based global cultural risk consultancy. As a political scientist, Catherine believes that rigorous social and cultural analyses can help leaders make better decisions, in both the public and private sectors. She advises business and political leaders around the world and serves regularly on government task forces.

The word ‘narrative’ often has adverse effects on my audiences: a rolling of the eyes at best; switching off entirely, at worst. Most sit queasily trying to tame their allergy to a word that has become over-used and under-valued. This is a great shame.

But why should we care about stories? Well, think of the state of Europe at the moment: a European Union that has not been able to evolve a new narrative (beyond its post-war rationale as a guarantee of peace) has become hampered and weak, fragmented in the face of crises and unable to (re-)capture the allegiance of its own citizens. What if it did have a new narrative? Would it be able to cope with new forms of diversity, to turn

new challenges into opportunities? The point is that in the absence of a strong, new narrative promulgated by institutions and shared by its people, across its diverse geographical and political landscapes, Europe is not coping. It is not re-inventing itself. It is not playing the role it should be playing on the world stage, and it is letting its own people down. That’s what happens in the absence of a narrative: no one can imagine themselves as part of a greater whole beyond short-term wins and losses, beyond their immediate circle of family and friends (people who are ‘like’ them). The absence of a narrative betrays the absence of the institutional imagination that allows us to plan our future together as we evolve — together.

The Importance of the Institutional Imagination

In his wonderful (and oft misunderstood) 1983 book *Imagined Communities*,¹ the late Benedict Anderson pointed to the spread of print capitalism — not just the advent of the printing press, but also capitalism's ability to circulate the results — as the point of origin of nationalism. Print capitalism, he argued, is what made “imagined communities” possible. In other words, it enabled human beings to think of themselves as connected despite time and distance.

Attributing the advent of national consciousness to the development of the printing press, Anderson traced all of the transformations unleashed by the latter: the circulation of ideas in cheaper and faster ways, the creation of communities of thought, the emergence of national languages and the development of secular allegiances which came to be seen as the defining features of modern nationalism. What Anderson highlights is the capacity of shared stories to create shared destinies.

Claus Offe further develops this idea in his well-known discussion about institutions: it is through institutions,

he argues, that necessary moral codes and beliefs are generated — along with, more importantly, the most necessary of illusions for stable democratic societies: that I share something with people whom I have never met. That, as Offe puts it, “my anonymous fellow ‘citizens’ are actually trusted, ‘compatriots’”.²

My point here is that institutions and narratives go hand in hand: the narrative generates a sense of shared destiny; this is encoded, promulgated and upheld by institutions, who in turn strengthen the narrative, which in turn strengthens the institutions. The virtuous circle of a shared belonging needs both of these elements to be sustained. Institutions will not simply keep going if they are not fed by the imagination of the narrative, and narratives will not take root and play their full role, if they are not repeatedly upheld by active institutions committed to the narrative. What I have referred to as a virtuous circle is in fact a virtuous path: it moves forward as nation and state change and adapt to circumstances not necessarily of their own choosing. But it takes place within an institutional framework that is its own creation,

A good narrative can account for failure, expansive enough to fold in individual misfortunes while maintaining its logic. The many and varied strands of stories within a narrative can successfully incorporate the things that don't quite fit.

fueled by an ever-evolving capacity to tend to and harness the stories of its people and weave them into a narrative.

The Elusive Nature of Narratives

Narratives are elusive creatures — try too hard to make one and citizens are quick to catch the whiff of propaganda. The ‘Britishness’ story under Gordon Brown is a good example of a narrative shoved down people’s throat: a barely disguised attempt to ‘graft’ a message on an existing narrative about tolerance and community with the result that (a) the graft never ‘took’ and, (b) people began to question the ‘official motives’.

Yet, let them run fallow, unsupported by institutions, and narratives cease to perform their binding function.

Narratives are also elusive in the sense that, when they work, they are difficult to distinguish from habits, conventions, stories, myths and institutions themselves. So how can we tell when we’re seeing, or hearing, a narrative?

First, a narrative is not ‘just a story’ — it is a system of stories that hang together and make sense of the way history has unfolded; But it also offers a glimpse of the future as somewhere different, yet to which one can still relate.

Second, it is as much about believing in how the stories relate to one another as it is about the stories themselves. A narrative weaves stories together to make sense of history and of the present and future, according to a set of values that provide an explanation

for how a series of events needs to be understood and interpreted.

Third, a good narrative can account for failure, or at least for bumps in the road. It is expansive enough to fold in individual misfortunes while maintaining its logic. This is why the many and varied strands of stories within a narrative are important; because they can successfully incorporate the things that don’t quite fit. A good example would be the narrative of the American dream which can accommodate failure because its main thrust is that of adventure, and of people willing to seize their chance — rather than of success (which would have made it much more fragile). Still, there are enough stories of success that the narrative is effective in providing legitimacy and institutional momentum.

The minute a narrative becomes fixed, i.e. appears incapable of accounting for, and accommodating change, it starts to become dysfunctional.

Finally, a narrative is as much about the past as it is about the present or the future: one of its key roles is to change, adapt and expand in ways that allow its proponents and actors to evolve over time. The minute a narrative

becomes fixed, i.e. appears incapable of accounting for, and accommodating change, it starts to become dysfunctional. This has institutional effects. The French Republican narrative around *laïcité*, its particular brand of militant secularism, offers a good example of a once powerful narrative incapable of evolving to encompass change. The results on the institutions of the French Republic — chiefly, the alienation of a number of its non-secular citizens — are dramatic.

Narratives and Diversity

Diverse nations (by that I mean nations for whom the absence of a homogenous population might have been an obstacle to the cohesion needed to live together peacefully under a set of shared national institutions) seem to have long recognised the value of a good narrative. The Canadian narrative on multiculturalism — in which a multicultural ‘mosaic’ leaves even greater room for adaptation and change — is a case in point, and a manifest success as evidenced, in part, in the readiness with which Canadians, both recent and long-established, cite it as Canada’s founding creed; they also readily cite the protection afforded by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. But Canada’s multicultural narrative also seems capable of expanding — of encompassing new forms of diversity, new forms of the ‘new’.³

A powerful narrative, capable of evolving and accommodating new forms of diversity, is a key piece of institutional architecture.

The Canadian mosaic, as it is known, is just under-specified enough to be powerful, because it remains accommodating. The narrowly defined linguistic multiculturalism of a few generations ago has gradually given way to a broader multiculturalism that addresses mega-trends that might have threatened the nation and its institutions: inequality, new demands for recognition, and new ways of formulating such demands. In the face of this, Canadian institutions continue to uphold multiculturalism: for every new challenge, there is a corresponding attempt to respond through the promotion and expansion of the multicultural narrative and its clockwork — but generous — logic. Whether in the face of terrorism (the role of Muslim community leaders is often pointed to in the surfacing of the so-called ‘Toronto 18’ plot in 2006) or in the face of the Syrian refugee crisis (strengthened by Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau’s presence at the airport in December 2015 to welcome the refugees with the words “You arrive as refugees, but you leave this airport as permanent residents of Canada”), multiculturalism is seen

as an essential but accommodating narrative that underpins both behaviour and expectations. But it has changed: housing quotas are no longer quite as engineered, or engineered on the same basis as before. For example, Toronto Community Housing reflects a concern for new forms of discrimination and inequality along generational and income lines. It has become accepted that diversity runs deeper than race, or gender, that it can look different, or needs to be spotted through a different set of lenses.

The point here is that a powerful narrative, capable of evolving and accommodating new forms of diversity, is a key piece of institutional architecture. Diversity will not cease to come up as a relevant issue, because we can expect some enormous changes ahead — in our

family lives, in our working lives, in the way we move across the globe, and the way we choose to spend our time, our money, our energy. Our successful societies have given us more choice and more of a capacity for educated choices. This is bound to reshape the way in which we coalesce with one another, who we think is similar to us, whose differences we can relate to, and whose may seem increasingly alien. So importantly, while narratives need to adapt, they are also a powerful way to help us and our institutions adapt in the face of change. By continuing to maintain Offe's necessary 'democratic illusion', strong adaptive narratives allow us to evolve with confidence, to change whilst remaining true to ourselves as collectives. 

NOTES

1. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).
2. Claus Offe, "How can we trust our fellow citizens?", in *Democracy and Trust*, ed. Mark Warren (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 63.
3. For the most recent evidence, see *The Current State of Multiculturalism in Canada: The New Evidence*, Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2010. See in particular pages 7 and 8 for references [citing Michael Adams, *Unlikely Utopia: The Surprising Triumph of Canadian Pluralism* (Toronto: Viking, 2007)]. <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/pdf/pub/multi-state.pdf>. For the most recent data from 2015, see <http://www.environicsinstitute.org/uploads/institute-projects/environics%20institute%20-%20focus%20canada%20spring%202015%20survey%20on%20immigration-multiculturalism%20-%20final%20report%20-%20june%2030-2015.pdf>.



OPINION

Race ... or Erase?

Does race continue to be relevant in modern, diverse Singapore?

BY
NGIAM SIEW YING

Ngiam Siew Ying is Senior Director in the National Population and Talent Division. The views expressed in this article are her own.

The Changes Are Real

Recently, the daughter of a Malay friend was asked whether she was “Chinese, Malay or Indian”. She replied that she was “English” — the language they speak most at home. In my own extended family, traditions and practices that started out predominantly Hainanese in character have been gradually blended with those practised by the Peranakans, Teochews and Hokkiens as more relatives marry outside our original dialect group.

While Singaporeans cherish and seek to keep alive our various cultures and traditions over the generations, there is no doubt that they have evolved after decades of life in a diverse society. Things have changed in the last fifty years, and will continue to change in the next fifty. Which lines will blur? What distinctions will lose their lustre? What is core to our identity as Singaporeans?

Singapore takes in new immigrants at the pace of about 20,000 new citizens and 30,000 new Permanent Residents (PRs) each year. Compared to the base of about 3.9 million residents, this is not considered large, but cumulated over the years, we can easily say that Singapore is a nation of immigrants. Few of us can trace our roots in Singapore beyond two generations.

About 2 in 10 marriages in Singapore are inter-ethnic, and 4 in 10 are between a citizen and non-citizen (either PR or foreigner). An estimated 10% of our youths under 18 today are inter-ethnic, and this will only rise.

Multiple identities and more complex sub-ethnicities are increasingly the reality today. Can we then assume the structures of administration and governance — structures that have served Singapore well for the past fifty years — will continue to work in the

next fifty? Can we assume that the peace and harmony we have carefully cultivated and defended in society will survive the test of time and change?

Do Our Race-based Policies Continue to Serve Us Well?

Systems and policies do find a way to work themselves out, but the concern is whether our systems and policies perpetuate a false sense of security about the level of social cohesion we have achieved, or whether they serve to create an exclusive identity of what a Singaporean is — permanently excluding anybody who falls outside that definition.

Some differences cannot simply be papered over with labels. I suspect we would all feel very much less Singaporean if we were to remove our collective multiracial identity.

For the family from the Philippines who have become Singapore citizens, will their children be forced to learn Mandarin, Malay or Tamil as their mother tongue language, as Tagalog is not offered in our schools? If I am neither Chinese, Malay, Indian nor Eurasian, which self-help group should I approach for help? Should the newly wed Chinese-Indian couple apply for their first BTO flat as Chinese or

Indian? Does it matter which race they subscribe to more, or which race allows them an advantage with the quotas and better access to their dream flat? Is this fair to the couples who do not have such flexibility of choice?

In the past, almost everyone had to make accommodations and compromises in order to fit into a nascent society just finding its footing and identity. Today, such sacrifices seem to weigh disproportionately on the newcomers, who may not fit readily into the original categories which our society and governance structures have grown used to. The extent of this mismatch will no doubt increase, as the world becomes smaller and society more diverse.

If racial categorisation conflates issues, over-complicates matters, over-classifies people, and is increasingly irrelevant, why not simply do away with it, and let us all just be Singaporean? This would also free us from the awkward 'Others' category applied to all who are not Chinese, Malay or Indian in extraction. Can and should Singapore go this way?

What if We Are Just Singaporean?

Unfortunately, the other side of the coin is not any more comfortable.

Singapore separated from Malaysia and gained independence as one united multiracial nation. We pledged to be one nation regardless of race, language or religion. We also enshrined in our Constitution important protections

for the rights of minorities. This was in part to ensure that everyone can be on equal standing, with national representation, regardless of the size of their community. Would glossing over cultural traditions, identities and practices not go against the spirit of treating our cultural differences with respect and sensitivity? The race riots of the 1960s, while a distant memory for most Singaporeans, remain a relevant and dire warning about what could yet happen if matters pertaining to race are not handled with great care.

Countries like France, which has opted for citizens to identify themselves as French, to the exclusion of their racial identities, do not seem to have fared much better at maintaining social cohesion, keeping peace, and ensuring level progress amongst its different communities. Some differences cannot simply be papered over with labels.

Conversely, I suspect we would all feel very much less Singaporean if we were to remove our collective multiracial identity — this is very much a part of who we are, as a society of immigrants from many different parts of the world, who somehow get along and made it work against the odds.

Striking a Balance

So this is an issue with no clear comfortable landing spot. The status quo belies some inconvenient loopholes, and keeping to it risks policy obsolescence. Seeking to make changes risks de-stabilising the

current hard-won equilibrium, a risk with a price that may be too high to pay. Instead, what we might pursue is perhaps a model of multiculturalism in which a few principles are upheld.

Disproportionate effort should be made to integrate smaller and newer social groups into Singapore society. It follows that resources may be disproportionately allocated, depending on need. The influence one wields should not depend on the size of one's demographic group in society.

First, **equality**. This means that we are Singaporean, regardless of race, language or religion. All citizens should enjoy equal standing and legitimacy as members of society, regardless of individual background and affiliation. Every Singaporean committed to our country has an equal right to belong, and the colour of one's skin does not make us any more or less Singaporean, nor more or less deserving of the rights and responsibilities of being Singaporean. This also means that disproportionate effort should be made to integrate smaller and newer social groups into Singapore society, including our naturalised citizens who have made the decision to become Singaporean. It follows that resources may be disproportionately allocated,

depending on need, as smaller groups may not have the economies of scale enjoyed by the larger groups. The influence one wields should not depend on the size of one's demographic group in society.

Second, there should be **reasonable accommodation of differences**. Individuals and cultures have different needs and these should be accommodated as long as it does not impose undue hardship. Of course, reasonableness is subjective, as is the definition of 'undue hardship'. Yet Singapore has, by edict or by natural instinct, been practising our own unique form of reasonable accommodation: we are accepting of and cater for different dietary restrictions, different cultural beliefs, practices and even superstitions; we have evolved our own ways of managing our national life around these differences. While we might debate what is reasonable, or whether these accommodations may have unintended consequences, this has served to bring greater awareness of the diversity and difference in our midst. This process towards reasonable accommodation is important and should never be taken for granted. Instead, we need to nurture a more open and consultative process for recourse and consensus building.

The administrative policies or governance structures we construct will influence the definition of what makes a Singaporean.

Finally, we need **an inclusive national identity**. Two options present themselves. We can choose a national identity anchored on our ancestry and heritage, symbolised by the physical characteristics, language, traditions and practices typical of our founding racial groups. Such an identity may be comforting in its familiarity and sense of security to those already included within its ambit. The common space is substantial, and the shared memories plentiful. On the other hand, we could also anchor our national identity on attainable *values* (e.g., kindness, civic-mindedness, equality), rather than on immutable traits such as skin colour, race and place of origin. This may offer less assurance to the in-group, and values can be tenuous, hard to define, shift with time, and influenced by newcomers. However, this offers the potential for a broader, more far-reaching definition of what it means to belong, and allows the adoption of newcomers into the Singapore family. The question is: which approach would result in greater national resilience and better help Singapore to weather the complexities and realities of the world?

Our choices could have unintended consequences. The administrative policies or governance structures we construct will influence the definition of what makes a Singaporean. A society in which relations are tense places a strain on good sense and common courtesies. My favourite example is that

of Joseph Schooling, an accomplished national swimmer. He is Singaporean born and bred, and is Eurasian, one of the original, longstanding groups in Singapore. Despite his excellent contributions to his sport on behalf of Singapore, the fact that he does not carry a more common Chinese, Malay or Indian family name gave rise to accusations that he was not a true-blue Singaporean. How we progress as a nation, comfortable both in our own skins and our shared national identity, will be reflected in how we view and treat our future ‘Joseph Schooling’s’ — and by extension how we treat anyone else who is committed to Singapore and contributes to our collective success.

False Dichotomy

At the end of the day, the choice between being defined by our race or by our nationality is a false dichotomy: we should not pretend that we even have a choice in this matter. Fundamentally, we cannot help being both members of a particular racial group as well as being Singaporean — we can take

neither out of an individual, nor should we ever try to do so.

We cannot help being both members of a particular racial group as well as being Singaporean — we can take neither out of an individual, nor should we ever try to do so.

What we can do, however, is to subscribe to a fair and just societal system, based on a common set of principles. In everything that we do and in every policy we create, we should ask ourselves: are we upholding the principles of equality, reasonable accommodation, and does it allow newcomers to be included? These principles are not new; they are already deeply enshrined in our Constitution and pledge. If we can maintain a balance on all three fronts, I believe we will be assured of a future society that is generous in spirit and resilient in the face of any challenges or changes to come. 🌸



INTERVIEW WITH PAULIN TAY STRAUGHAN

Making Public Policy Relevant for Bicultural Families in Singapore

A conversation with noted sociologist Paulin Tay Straughan offers insights on Singapore's growing social diversity and its implications for bicultural families and social policy.

**PAULIN TAY
STRAUGHAN**

AND

KHARINA ZAINAL

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This article is written by Kharina, based on conversations with Professor Straughan, conducted on 19 January 2016.

The realities of globalisation have transformed the way we live our lives and form families. We begin to be exposed and be comfortable relating to other people and their cultures. Singaporeans are marrying fellow Singaporeans across ethnicities and across nationalities. Singaporeans with multiple identities and more complex sub-ethnicities are increasingly the reality today. Inter-ethnic marriages are becoming more common — accounting for about 1 in every 5 marriages in Singapore in 2014, compared to about 1 in every 10 in

2004.¹ About 2 in every 5 marriages are transnational — a figure that has not changed very much in the last decade, being 37% in 2014 and 36% in 2004. When these couples go on to be parents, they will raise their children in the midst of colourful blends of cultures, identities and ethnicities. For children from bicultural or bi-national families, what does it mean to be Singaporean? How do they relate with their families, peers and communities across cultures? What is home, community and country to them?

National University of Singapore Professor Paulin Tay Straughan has a unique perspective — both personal and professional — on the integration of children from bicultural families. She is married to Dr Robert Straughan, an American, and they have two grown up sons — both Singaporean, born and bred here. Her sons feel deeply Singaporean and American at the same time. A keen observer of social policies in Singapore, she makes the point that bicultural families hold “very different perspectives and experiences on issues of national identity, family and other social policies”. Policies that have worked well for the past fifty years may no longer be adequate for a changing social landscape, which includes an increasingly diverse population, as well as a growing number

of bicultural households. “Discussions on biculturalism,” Professor Straughan argues, “have to be part of a larger conversation on Singapore’s identity.”

On the Impact of Biculturalism on Society and Social Policies

While biculturalism, and increasing social diversity in general, is set to have a profound impact on Singaporean society, it is not yet clear how it will shape ongoing conversations about Singapore’s identity, core values, and policies. Professor Straughan surmises that some may feel uneasy about the prospect, “since the articulation of that ambivalent notion of national identity is already so tricky with just Singaporeans in the conversation, let alone having foreigners now”. But the truth is we do not have a choice.

ON DEFINING BICULTURALISM

In sociology, biculturalism involves two originally distinct cultures in some form of co-existence. The children from these families will live, embrace and transverse the richness of both cultures, often unconscious about the need to make any distinction from one or the other because it is as natural as their left and right limbs. They are born to the world with both. The coming together of both cultures defines them and their beliefs. Indeed, these children are the outcome of a significant coming together of differences.

“Marriage and family formation are the most intimate and private of social relationships. To be able to marry a person who is ethnically and culturally different from yours require mutual deep appreciation of each other’s way of life and beliefs.”

– Paulin Tay Straughan

She points out an example of why such conversations matter more than ever:

“Foreign spouses who choose to become naturalised citizens will also want their stories inscribed into the national core. But this should not be something new to us, as Singapore was like that many years ago as a young migrant society and accidental nation. A series of happy accidents helped us to attract people from all over the region to settle in Singapore where we now call home.”

The implication is that if policies make it hard for Singaporeans with foreign spouses to settle in Singapore, the entire household may leave, or those that are already resident overseas will not return. Particularly with Singapore’s already low fertility rates, we cannot afford to lose any more Singaporean sons and daughters who might otherwise be ready to come home.

We cannot afford to lose any Singaporeans if we can help it; social policies need to reflect and cater to the diverse reality of our households today.

Professor Straughan also recounts her son’s story, who had to choose between a Singaporean and an American citizenship after having been born and

schooled in Singapore and completing National Service. It was a difficult decision both for him and the entire family. There was a deep sense of resentment at being forced to choose only one citizenship when he had, all his life, held dear both his Singaporean and American roots — it was like being asked to chop off a limb. While she believes that such situations should be considered on a case-by-case basis, the last thing we want is for children from bicultural families to withdraw from the conversation, because they have been forced into a no-win situation, for instance by current policies against dual citizenship. We cannot afford to lose any Singaporeans if we can help it; social policies need to reflect and cater to the diverse reality of our households today.

On Engaging Bicultural Families: Looking for Commonalities

One way to resolve the difficult question of identity in an inclusive way is to look for commonalities. This is easier in societies which are more culturally homogenous, such as Japan and Korea. As Professor Straughan highlights, given Singapore’s diversity, the challenge is different:

“How do we integrate foreigners into our national script? What are the shared identity and shared values from these ‘accidental co-citizens’? The broad strokes are easy to agree upon: multiculturalism, tolerance for others’ cultural practices, justice and equality. Singapore stands

for good, clean, incorruptible governance across the board. This is an important promise. Meritocracy works well only when you cannot bribe your way up, although people still have different starting points, which we must be aware of.”

– On social integration and shared values

But when we start to look at our normative culture — i.e., the practices and routines of our everyday lives — it becomes much more subjective, individual and therefore complex. In a dense city such as Singapore, it is very difficult not to encounter someone with a different ethnicity, culture or belief system; by necessity, Singaporeans are exposed to other cultures, languages, cuisines and ways of life. The question, however, is whether we are accepting of this diversity:

“On a day-to-day basis, at an individual level, it is easy to practise: we just have to be open-minded. But at a national level, it becomes more complex. What do we expect to see when we go into a Singaporean home? Does it only depend on the ethnicity of the family? What do the different cuisines in the hawker centre say about our culture? What is uniquely Singapore? Over the years, it must be an embodiment of the different ethnicities. We should not be surprised if a Singaporean Chinese feel more at ease with a Singaporean Malay compared to a mainland Chinese. This is because the Singaporean Chinese

may have more commonalities with a fellow Singaporean of a different ethnicity. And these could be in the form of familiarity towards each other’s language or food. For example, a Chinese Singaporean may understand Malay terms such as ‘cantik’ and ‘bodoh’ or would have tasted mee rebus and nasi lemak. But when hosted for dinner by a mainland Chinese family, this same Chinese Singaporean may be surprised by the dishes and their preparation, which all seem foreign to him.”

– On embracing our uniquely hybrid Singaporean identities

The implication is that we already have a uniquely Singaporean grasp of culture, including those not immediately our own. But in order for this unique perspective to be inclusive and complete, Singaporeans from all walks of life, including those of bicultural backgrounds, should be rendered visible, engaged and given a voice.

This requires particular sensitivity, even as a younger generation of Singaporeans yearn for a sense of belonging and a way to define themselves in increasingly globalised and competitive environments. Professor Straughan argues that:

“Children from bicultural families are no different. They, too, start to think about what will anchor them to Singapore. For example, a Singaporean-Vietnamese child will feel alienated if he is asked to downplay his Vietnamese roots.

We have to be tactful, sensitive and respectful when we engage citizens. It is important to be curious about each other without fear. Give space to discuss cultural practices which define our everyday lives. There should be no ranking or judgement regarding what is superior or inferior. The purpose of such conversations is to seek out commonalities. This is a never-ending exercise which we have to begin now, include the younger generation, and especially those from bicultural families.”
– On giving space to difference

There are times when we fail to recognise the importance of allowing Singaporeans air time. It is important to let people speak to release some angst.

Encouraging These Conversations to Take Place

Professor Straughan feels that such discussions should begin in school,

especially at the primary and secondary levels. We need to mainstream into schools topics such as the impact of internationalisation and globalisation or the importance of being an inclusive society, discussed against a background of our ongoing efforts and supporting policies, including laws that protect social harmony or which exclude hate speech. It would be better to have healthy avenues for “safe conversations”, rather than allow these views to go underground.

In Professor Straughan’s view, it is unfortunate that “National Education has become perceived as top-down indoctrination”. But it need not be the case, she argues, if Singaporeans are able to weave their stories together organically, on appropriate platforms where the government is only one of the players rather than the dominant voice.

“There are times,” she argues, “when we fail to recognise the importance of allowing Singaporeans air time. It is important to let people speak to release some angst.” ✧

NOTE

1. Inter-ethnic marriages constituted 20.4% of total marriages in 2014, up from 13.1% in 2004. In 2014, the proportion of inter-ethnic marriages continue to be higher among Muslim marriages (34.4%) than among civil marriages (17%). See Department of Statistics, “Statistics on Marriage and Divorces: Reference year 2014”, July 2015, accessed January 29, 2016, www.singstat.gov.sg.



INTERVIEW WITH PAUL LIGHT

The Nature of Public Trust in Government

A veteran scholar explores the nature of public trust in government and its impact on public policy and service delivery.

PAUL LIGHT

Dr Paul C. Light is Paulette Goddard Professor of Public Service in the New York University's Robert F. Wagner School of Public Service and founding principal investigator of the Global Center for Public Service. His research interests include bureaucracy, civil service, Congress, entitlement programmes, executive branch, government reform, nonprofit effectiveness, organisational change, and the political appointment process. Professor Light is the author of 25 books, the most recent being *Government by Investigation: Presidents, Congress, and the Search for Answers, 1945–2012* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2014).

Professor Light met with ETHOS Editor-in-Chief Alvin Pang on 30 July 2014 when he was in Singapore for a visit jointly hosted by the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, the Centre for Strategic Futures and the Civil Service College.

While Singaporeans' trust in government over the years has been high, governments around the world are seeing a general decline in public trust. Is this a broader phenomenon?

We are really not sure what is going on in developed and developing nations. In the United States (US), the high point of trust in the government was in the 1950s. It began to fall in the 1960s and the approximate cause was not the Vietnam War; it was civil rights. Vietnam did contribute to further erosion, as did the Watergate scandal and Nixon's resignation. We did not have great authority figures to guide us as

Singapore had and still has, but history has a way of working its will through demographic replacement, through technological change, through increased diversity. Of course, the US has always had a fair amount of ambivalence about how strong the government should be. In a sense, the future of Singapore's trust in government is based in part on the fact that you already have trust in government. It's hard to hold on to something of great value when you no longer have the shared experience of having lived through historical or period effects of the kind we see in

generational displacements. So in the US we have the concept of the Greatest Generation, which was my father's generation, who went through the Depression and World War II. This is also the generation that is dying out, so you lose some historical anchors, along with the social capital and bonds that tie people and governments together. In the same way, twenty years from now, will people remember what Singapore was like twenty years ago?

In the US and Western Europe, people still have good experiences with government but they will attribute the experience to good luck or a fluke.

I would not predict that your trust in government is going to fall, but it will only stay up if you respond to prevailing social and historical drivers. Right now we are in a setting where access to information is great, and public expectations in terms of speed, of transaction, quality of interaction, transparency, opportunity for free expressions and so forth, are high. Like it or not, these expectations exist and if governments don't keep up, then they become a representation of the old stodgy past. And then even if they are effective, they are seen as being effective by accident. That's one of the things

you see in the US and Western Europe: people still have good experiences with government but they will attribute the experience to good luck or a fluke, because the reputation of government has become so bad. You have to be very careful about that.

To address public perception and build trust, should governments then become better at communicating their successes, as the private sector often does?

I think anybody who believes that distrust is merely a problem that can be solved by getting newspapers to publish more good news about government is mistaken. Attitudes towards government are driven by a number of factors. First, bad news sells and attracts readers. Second, reading about how wonderful government is in helping this person or that person will not have a penetrating effect, because the public doesn't trust the media anymore. They believe that the news is biased — and with today's technology, you no longer have to read or listen to what you don't like. You can find your own stations and sources that tell you what you want to hear, or tell your side of the story. So there's no agreement anymore on what the news is. I don't think public relations campaigns work because even the notion of having a PR campaign is going to produce scepticism (“What are they hiding?”) about PR being managed.

Performance talks, and that's what people remember. It's the story; it's the dog that doesn't bark that is important to trust in government. You must do your jobs well, and you have to take distrust as a natural part of the process. When something goes wrong, as it inevitably does from time to time, you must respond to it with candour. What we often lack in government is the willingness to admit a mistake. We don't do that very well.

Now more often than not it is the bad stories that show up in the media. It's not a functional lack of good news but the nature of the media. After the Challenger space shuttle accident, it became clear from the subsequent investigation that it could have been prevented, but dissent had been suppressed internally, leading to the accident. Later, NASA launched another space shuttle successfully but the news was still negative: that the shuttle did not blow up. The positive outcome became an opportunity to rehash the tragedy again.

Governments, like all organisations, are going to make mistakes. It is just that these tend to be more transparent to the public than what corporations do. To some extent, trust in government is always going to be corroded because in public policy, there are people who are winners and those who are losers. Trust in government is not a good

indicator of whether or not government is trustworthy or whether government is performing. We have tried to unpack trust in government and understand what drives that measure. It's not a good measure but the best you can do is do your best and admit when you make a mistake.

You must do your jobs well, and you have to take distrust as a natural part of the process. When something goes wrong, as it inevitably does from time to time, you must respond to it with candour.

How should governments assess their success, particularly for areas in which there are no clear measurable standards? Should public trust be one of the indicators of a government's performance?

I would not use trust as a measure of how well government is doing. Trust in government is not well linked to performance. Either negative or positive, bad news about government only confirms to the distrustful that their mistrust was justified, whereas good news doesn't impact trust very much. There are so many factors that bleed into performance that are beyond government's control: the basic foundation of a good measurement system is that you should only use metrics that you

can control through your activity. Otherwise, the performance measurement is imbalanced.

That said, I think there is a hierarchy of performance. Public agencies should pursue zero failures, Six Sigma performance, zero tolerance for poor service, and so on. You should always aim for 100% accuracy and quality of service — that subway should always be on time, period. If you lower those expectations, you are on a slippery slope and you will eventually reach zero. Now is that going to affect trust in government measured by ordinary survey research? Probably not.

Trust in government is not a good indicator of whether or not the government is trustworthy or whether government is performing.

Our research on trust in governments suggests that it's an amalgam of variables that are well beyond the reach of governments' day-to-day performance — trust in government is not a referendum on government performance nor is it a referendum on media coverage. It's an amalgam of how you feel about many things, from what happened in the grocery store to what happened at the airline counter, for example.

Singapore is successful not because of any one special factor, but because

of the sum total of its systems and its cohesion — but that is going to be tested in the future. The greater risk to a society like Singapore is the corrosion of the social capital that has made it so successful, which may result in fractures along factional lines based on social, economic, religious elements. But that is not inevitable. There can be good structured dialogue about what the core values are in society and how society should achieve them. Public participation in government, consensus building, are all part of a long-standing debate about how societies should work.

The world is changing; it's no longer bounded by the sea or the border and I admire Singapore for being as open as it is. I've been to other societies that are very tight, that rely on the rule of law to police civil obedience or moral activity, but that is difficult: the citizenry becomes restless. But these are great moral conundrums that all nations face. What do you do about the moral fabric of our society? How do you deal with inequality? How do you deal with educational access and the opportunity to live a rich and full life? You can engage these at a higher order, engage in public dialogue, while being aware that you're going to alienate people no matter what you do, and you have to deal with that. All you can do in this government, which is well-performing, is to try to keep up with this changing world and your demographic changes will require you to change some of your practices, I should think.

How can the Singapore government step up to the expectations of a generation accustomed to the immediacy and responsiveness of the digital world, while balancing its duty to serve the larger public good for the long term?

One fundamental issue confronting government in the immediate term is the fact that our lives are instantly transparent. You can know everything we need to know through Google maps, through the cloud, through all sorts of different social platforms. Governments cannot hold public trust for long if they are not equally transparent, yet governments cannot violate the privacy of its citizenry. So it's a balancing act for the public sector.

Governments are not going to be as transaction-oriented as Amazon or Alibaba, but government can be responsive; its websites must be responsive. Governments all over the world have a lot of difficulty managing information well because we don't have that expectation that governments can be as fast and transparent as possible without violating our privacy and without exposing us to risks such as fraud or terrorism.

It is also up to government to deliver on promises made. There's no excuse for not doing so. If the promise needs to be changed, you need to talk about the cost and benefits of doing so and what will have to be given up in order to get it. You set goals, meet them and then you can have a conversation about

whether the goals need to be reset. You pledge that the trains will come every ten minutes but they will be on time. And then we can talk about what the cost is to society, who is going to have to pay for it to come every five minutes. But if you go down to that train at rush hour in the morning and you have to use your elbows to get onto the train and government isn't watching, then you are creating an impression, but not one that you hope for: the impression is that government isn't paying attention. It doesn't matter if your trains have nice straps and interiors and so on: the purpose of the subway train is not to make government feel good about how effective it is at purchasing train cars.

Trust in government is not a referendum on government performance nor is it a referendum on media coverage. It's an amalgam of how you feel about many things well beyond the reach of governments' day-to-day performance.

So you have to work through the priorities and trade-offs. However, my experience has been that working through the priorities from on high through an opaque process, where nobody understands how you reach that decision, is a source of skewed expectations: *I was not involved in that decision, they did not take my views into*

Over-promising is more of a problem than under-promising, but under-promising creates an expectation that government is not very competent.

account, they are not listening to me, etc. You should deliver on your promises and then decide whether or not you've promised too much or too little. Over-promising is more of a problem than under-promising, but under-promising creates an expectation that government is not very competent. So find the point of compromise where the promise is accurate, honoured and appropriate: this is part of government. This is what makes Singapore special.

The government is going to be tested in coming decades as generations replace each other, each bringing a different set of problems. The good news: Singapore has a generation in place and set to lead government in future, who are much more technologically

savvy than the generation which is currently running government right now. Singapore doesn't face a single future, nor even two or three futures. It faces a thousand futures squared and you must understand which future you wish to pursue and which you wish to avoid. You can look at the trends and see the stresses coming. You can better understand, through rigorous methodologies, what the shock absorbers have been and will be in the Singapore system. You have the tools to do the robust modelling to see what the futures look like and to hedge against the downside futures and to shape for the upside. That's where Singapore needs to focus. 🌸

Survey of Fairness Perceptions in Singapore Public Policy

A survey finds that the perceived fairness of public policies in Singapore varies according to the socioeconomic groups affected.

BY
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Introduction

Fairness is an important facet in policy discussions, because it influences how much support the government gets from the public when rolling out policies. However, there has been little research in Singapore that systematically explores fairness perceptions in public policy. In addition, perceptions of fairness change with time. For example, there are indications of a growing preference in Singapore for universal access to social transfers and support. Changing demographics may have also tilted fairness perceptions towards universal provisions that cater to an ageing population and a middle class that increasingly feels that the deck is stacked against them.

Do Singaporeans have a dominant view of what is fair or unfair in public policy? Are public perceptions of fairness consistent or do they vary across different policy domains? Are these perceptions systemic and what are their implicit rules? We conducted a survey to address these questions.

Objectives of the Survey

International surveys, such as the 2009 Bamfield and Horton's study,¹ have highlighted the importance of "progressive universalism" — a system in which everyone receives some benefits, but those in middle and higher income groups receive less than those in the low-income group. Their findings

“It’s my point that every policy that comes out has to be reasoned and reasonable. It’s reasoned in the sense that every policy has its rational grounds based on data, knowledge, for you to come to the best choice of what action to take. But every policy must also be reasonable in the minds of the people who are affected. Reasonableness is an emotional assessment and not a rational assessment. The reasonableness part of it is when the people are going to look at it and say ‘Does that seem fair, does that seem reasonable?’ The policy needs to pass this test. ”

Mr Lim Siong Guan, former Singapore Head of Civil Service²

suggest that people would be more willing to contribute to benefits with wider coverage. Bamfield and Horton further highlight that a common complaint was that the system was not generous enough towards the middle or “sandwiched class”. In other words, participants preferred to be treated differently from those at the top for taxes, but not too differently from those at the bottom for benefits.

Even though progressive universalism may be less efficient than a more targeted approach, it might receive higher public support and hence affect the willingness of the middle class to pay their share. For example, the British Social Attitudes Survey in 2012 found that 70% of participants opposed the idea of reducing taxes in return for making free health services on the National Health Service (NHS) only available to people with low earnings.³

However, it is worth noting that fairness perceptions may not be consistent across different public policy domains. Sectors such as education and healthcare for instance, may be subjected to different fairness criteria: education is considered fundamental to ensuring equality in opportunity, while medical care is regarded as a good with “special moral importance”.⁴ Bamfield and Horton’s survey also points out that while people were usually against targeted interventions, many participants

were prepared, when presented with evidence of barriers to opportunity, to support public interventions that specifically helped the disadvantaged, even at some cost to the rest of the population.

With these insights in mind, the Civil Service College, Singapore designed and commissioned a “Fairness Perceptions in Singapore Public Policy” survey, with a focus on the distributive fairness of how rights and government resources are allocated. In particular, there was interest to find out how Singaporeans view the targeted, universal, means-tested and universal approaches to allocating rights and public resources.⁵ It also examined if these fairness perceptions are consistent across different segments of the population and if they continue to be supported even at some cost to individuals (via higher taxes or prices). The survey, conducted in March and April 2014, was administered to a random sample of 1,002 Singaporeans aged 20 and above that closely resembled the demographic profile of Singapore Residents (i.e., age, gender, race, housing type and working status).⁶

Key Findings

The survey revealed several key insights on Singaporeans’ perceptions of fairness regarding the allocation of government resources.

KEY FINDING #1:

It is fair for taxpayers to pay higher income taxes to cover increased expenditure in healthcare, compared to childcare, preschool or unemployment benefits.

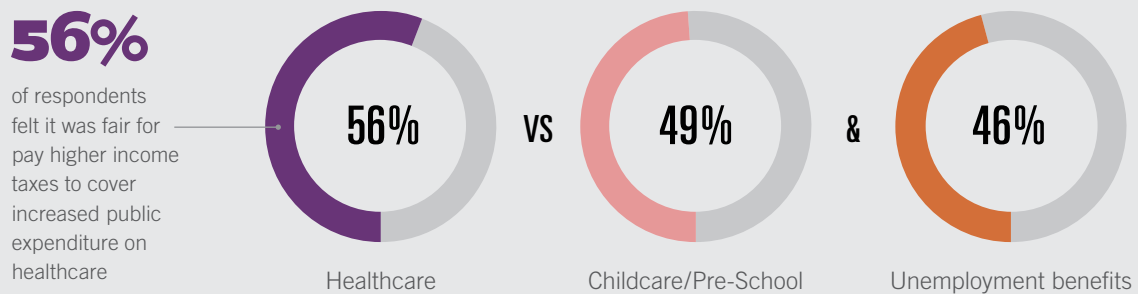


Figure 1. Level of Support for Using Taxes to Fund Healthcare, Childcare and Unemployment Benefits

A majority of respondents (56%) felt it was fair for pay higher income taxes to cover increased public expenditure on healthcare. In contrast, for unemployment benefits and childcare/kindergarten, only half or less of the respondents thought

it was fair to do so. This could be partly due to the profile of the respondents, as about a third of them (32%) were either single or married with no children, and only 3% were unemployed.

Policies with a wide reach should take on the universal, means-tested approach as this approach would likely to be perceived as fair by the majority of the public.

KEY FINDING #2:

The universal, means-tested approach to allocate government transfers and impose taxes is usually the fairest.

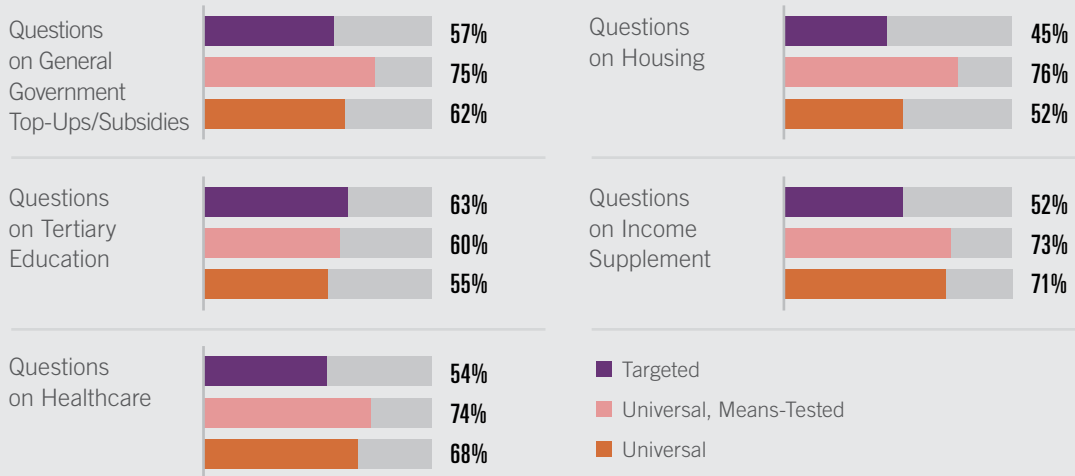


Figure 2. Fairness Responses to Approaches to Allocate Resources – Average by Domain

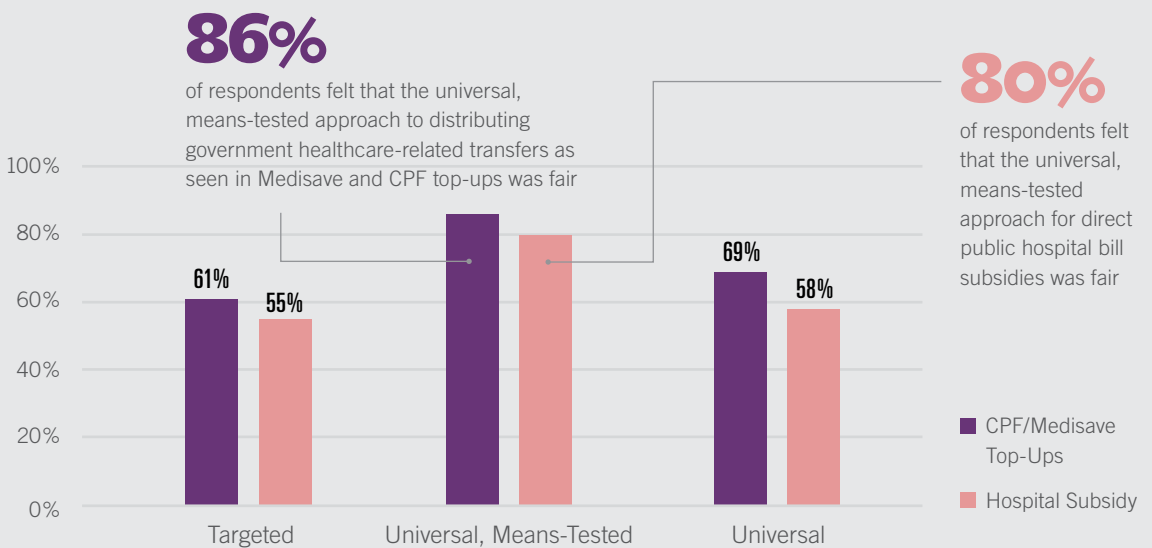


Figure 3. Preferred Allocation Approaches for Hospital Subsidies and CPF/Medisave Top-Ups



For example, for housing related questions that dealt with housing grants and property taxes, universal, means-tested approach received much more favourable returns than the other two approaches. Only about half of respondents felt the universal approach was fair, while targeted allocation was deemed unfair. For general government top-ups/subsidies, all three approaches were deemed fair.

There was clearly a preference for the universal, means-tested approach to taxes and allocating public resources across most domains. This meant that respondents preferred if everyone received some of the transfers or paid taxes, but the amount of transfer or tax should be differentiated according to income levels.

The universal, means-tested approach was clearly the most preferred for questions related to healthcare, general government top-ups, housing policies and transfers for vulnerable groups, followed by the universal and the targeted approaches (see Figure 2).

This finding could imply that policies with a wide reach should take on the universal, means-tested approach

when allocating transfers and tax burdens. This approach would likely to be perceived as fair by the majority of the public and would thus garner more support.

One example would be healthcare services (see Figure 3). The strong preference for a universal, means-tested approach to distributing government healthcare-related transfers was seen in Medisave and Central Provident Fund (CPF) top-ups, where 86% of respondents felt that this approach was fair. In terms of direct public hospital bill subsidies, 80% felt that the approach was fair. This dominant support for the means-test approach was seen even across different income groups, educational levels or gender.

KEY FINDING #3:

A well-supported policy could end up being perceived as unfair, when people are told that it would involve higher out-of-pocket payments.

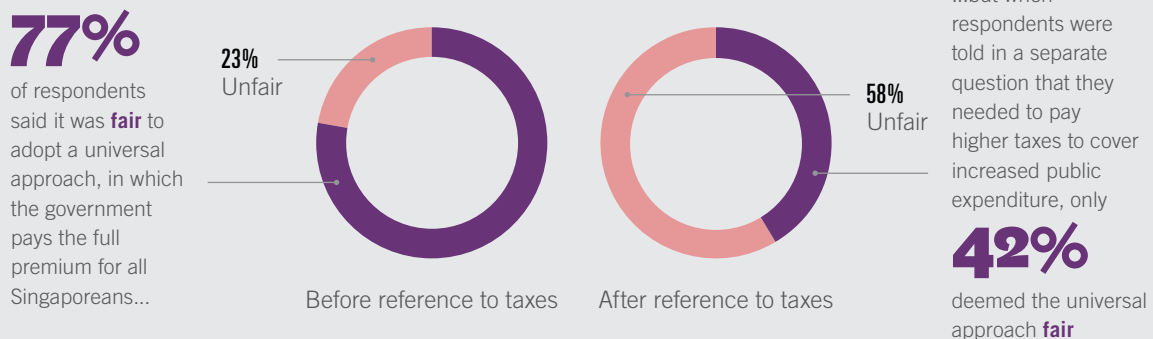
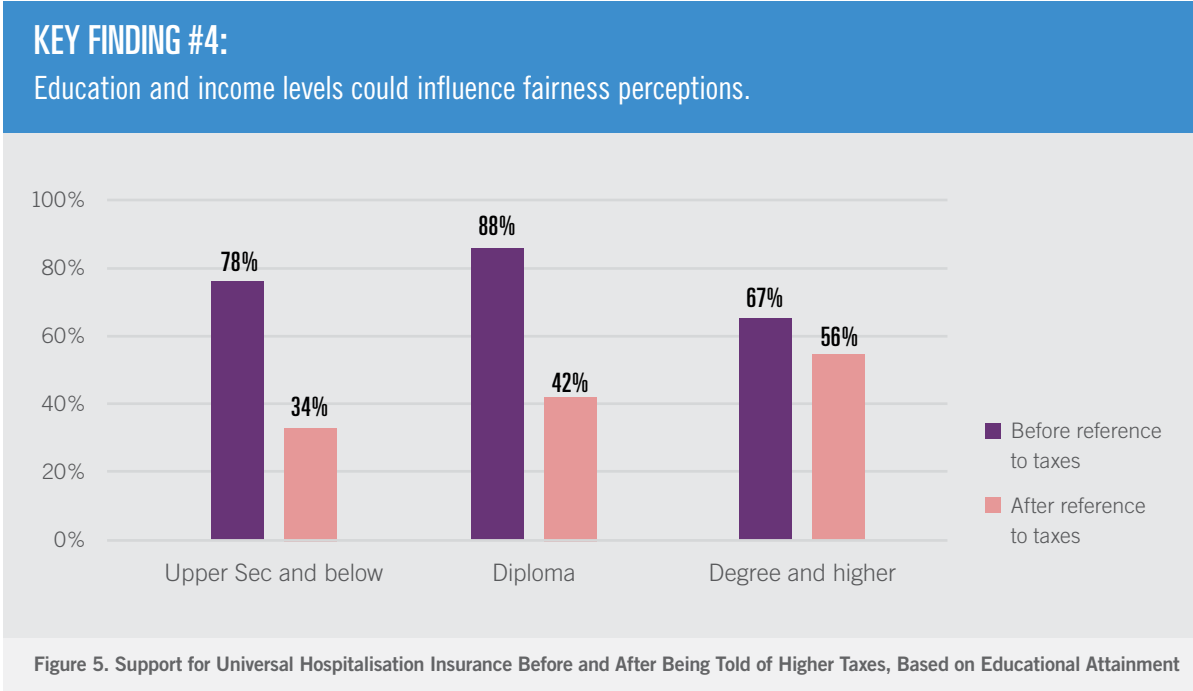


Figure 4. Support for Universal Hospitalisation Insurance Before and After Being Told of Higher Taxes

Hospitalisation insurance was one of the exceptions to the preference for a universal, means-tested approach. Instead, there was a strong preference for a universal approach, in which the government pays the full premium for all Singaporeans (77% said it was fair). This support was consistent across all income levels. A possible reason could be due to hospitalisation insurance being viewed as an ‘entitlement’ that the government should provide equally for all citizens.

However, when respondents were told in a separate question that they needed to pay higher taxes to cover increased public expenditure, the universal approach was deemed fair by only 42% (see Figure 4). In other words, citizens had strong initial impulses towards the collectivisation of medical insurance, but this was reduced when they realised taxes would rise to support this policy.



When analysing reactions to increased taxes in return for universal hospitalisation insurance, there were interesting variations based on income levels and educational attainment.

The first observation was that a larger proportion of those with higher education levels and household incomes seemed to feel that it was fair, even when told of the need for higher taxes

(CONT'D) KEY FINDING #4:

Education and income levels could influence fairness perceptions.

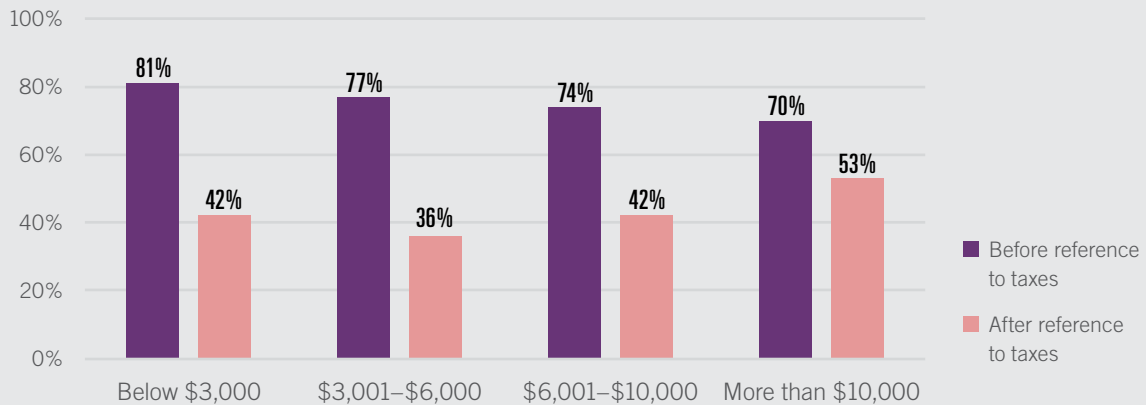


Figure 6. Support for Universal Hospitalisation Insurance Before and After Being Told of Higher Taxes, Based on Household Income Levels

or costs to individuals, to support higher public expenditure.

In the case of hospitalisation insurance, universal provision was seen as the fairest by all respondents. But degree holders and those with monthly household incomes of \$10,000 or more saw the smallest drop (by 11% and 17% respectively) in the 'fair' response when they were told of higher taxes

A larger proportion of those with higher education levels and household incomes seemed to feel that it was fair, even when told of the need for higher taxes or costs to individuals, to support higher public expenditure.

needed. The largest drop in support was among diploma holders and those from household incomes between \$3,001 and \$6,000 per month. Their support dropped by more than 40% once an increase in taxes was factored in (See Figures 5 and 6 for more details).

Similar patterns were observed for questions pertaining to transfers for low-wage workers. More respondents felt it was fair to provide low-wage workers with some benefits. However, at least half of them felt that the policy was unfair when told of the need to pay higher taxes or food prices to fund the support. Again, the fairness ratings among those with higher education levels and household incomes fell the least when told of the financial implications.

The second observation was that the “sandwiched class” showed lower support across all allocation approaches, especially for targeted schemes. The group with \$6,001–\$10,000 monthly household income expressed lower fairness levels when compared to all other income groups, even for the generally preferred universal, means-tested approach (see Figure 7). This observation was also seen across most policy domains.

In addition, a persistently large proportion of this income group consistently viewed the targeted approach as more unfair compared to the other income groups (both lower and

A persistently large proportion of the “sandwiched class” consistently viewed the targeted approach as more unfair compared to the other income groups — they are left out from most government transfer schemes while having to pay higher taxes.

higher incomes). This could possibly be due to the fact that this group viewed themselves as the “sandwiched class”, who are left out from most government transfer schemes while having to pay higher taxes. Hence, they reacted more strongly against the targeted approach that would help only the low-income groups.

(CONT'D) KEY FINDING #4:

Education and income levels could influence fairness perceptions.

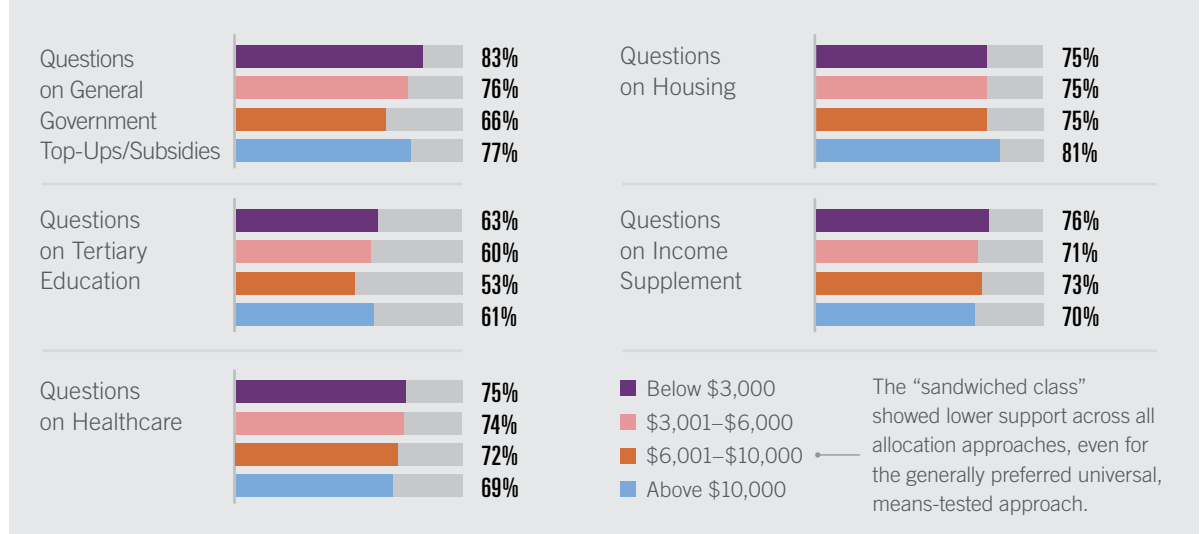


Figure 7. Support for Universal, Means-Tested Approach for Different Policy Domains, Based on Household Income Level

KEY FINDING #5:

Fairness perceptions on tertiary education differ between subsidies and fee increases.

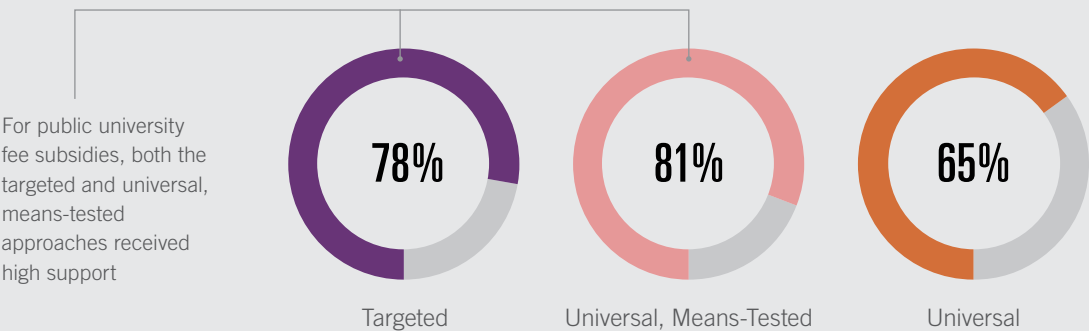


Figure 8. Support for Allocation Approach for University Fee Subsidies

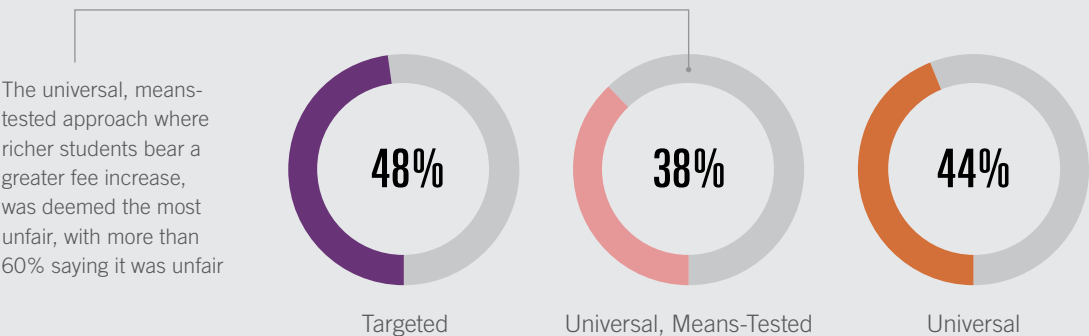


Figure 9. Support for Allocation Approaches for Tertiary Fee Increase Structures

Interestingly, fairness perceptions towards tertiary education subsidies and fee increases were divergent. For public university fee subsidies, both the targeted and universal, means-tested approaches received high support (78% and 81% respectively). On the other

hand, only 65% of respondents felt that the universal approach was fair (see Figure 8). Hence, it appeared that respondents felt a strong need to provide relatively more subsidies to students from lower-income households.

When it came to tertiary fee increases, at least half of the respondents already felt that it was unfair to pass the fee increase in any form to the students. Among possible fee increase structures, the universal, means-tested approach, where richer students bear a greater fee increase, was deemed the most unfair (more than 60% said unfair; see Figure 9). While this approach to fee increase would appear similar to the universal, means-tested approach to subsidies, where lower-income groups are favoured, framing it in the context of fee increases yielded a drastically different fairness response.

Furthermore, there were differences in fairness preferences by income levels when it came to fee increases. Those from low-income households (below \$3,000 per month) felt that it was most unfair when there was no differentiation in fee increase between them and the richer students. On the other hand, those from high-income households (\$10,000 and above per month) felt it was most unfair when the fee increase took on a targeted approach and was borne solely by richer students. The most surprising result came from respondents from the middle-income groups, who felt that the means-tested approach was the most unfair while being indifferent to the other two approaches.

There was thus no general consensus when it came to tertiary fee increases. The results suggest that respondents from each income group felt that any

approach that would place them at a disadvantage compared to others was unfair. This suggests that unlike other policy domains, tertiary education was not seen in a similar way across different income groups, possibly invoking a notion of opportunity and private benefit.

When it came to tertiary fee increases, respondents from each income group felt that any approach that would place them at a disadvantage compared to others was unfair.

Conclusion

This survey on “Fairness Perceptions in Singapore Public Policy” offers evidence on how Singaporeans view the way resources and rights are allocated in the current system.

A significant observation was that those in the middle-income group (with monthly household income of \$6,001–\$10,000) felt “sandwiched”. This group consistently expressed lower fairness levels than other groups for all redistribution approaches, including their most preferred universal, means-tested, which could be a signal to their sentiments of being left out of most government schemes targeted to help the poor, while still having to pay taxes.

Another important finding was that while the generally perceived

People felt it was fairer to pay a bit more for universal, means-tested subsidies and transfers, rather than pay less, through lower taxes, for targeted schemes.

fairness of a policy always dropped when people were informed that higher taxes were required to pay for higher expenditures, there were considerable variation among certain subgroups and domains. First, respondents with higher education levels (degree and above) and monthly household incomes (\$10,000 and above) had a greater tolerance for higher taxes in return for increased public expenditure. This could possibly be due to their better understanding of trade-offs in public finance and having more financial resources to cope with higher taxes or prices. Second, certain domains still received high level of support for increased expenditure, even taking higher taxes into account. One such area was healthcare: people generally felt that paying higher taxes

for more healthcare subsidies was fair. This is probably due to the fact that healthcare is something everyone expects to depend on sooner or later. On the other hand, expenditures on early child education and income support for lower wage groups saw larger relative drops in perceived fairness once higher taxes or out-of-pocket expenditures were mentioned.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there was a general preference for the universal means-tested approach to allocate public resources in most domains. People felt it was fairer to pay more for universal, means-tested subsidies and transfers, rather than pay less, through lower taxes, for targeted schemes. In other words, people seemed willing to tolerate some inefficiency and costs to themselves if the policy appeals to their sense of fairness.

These insights may inform Singapore policymakers' understanding of how policies can be designed for greater public buy-in, balanced against the efficiency of more targeted approaches. ✧

NOTES

1. Louise Bamfield and Tim Horton, "Understanding Attitudes to Tackling Economic Inequality" (York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2009), access date 19/02/2013, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/understanding-attitudes-tackling-economic-inequality>.
2. Lim Siong Guan, speech at the launch of the Public Relations Academy Conference, 28 June 2002.
3. A. Park, E. Clery, J. Curtice, M. Phillips and D. Utting, eds., *British Social Attitudes: The 29th Report* (London: NatCen Social Research, 2012), accessed 19 February 2013, <https://www.bsa-29.natcen.ac.uk>.
4. N. Daniels, *Just Health* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) and J. P. Ruger, "Health, Capability, and Justice: Toward a New Paradigm of Health Ethics, Policy and Law", *Cornell Journal of Law and Public Policy* 15 (2006): 403–82, cited in Julia Lynch and Sarah. E. Gollust, "Playing Fair: Fairness Beliefs and Health Policy Preferences in the United States", The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) Scholars in Health Policy Research Programme, Working Paper Series, WP-47, 2010, http://healthpolicyscholars.org/sites/healthpolicyscholars.org/files/w47_lynch.pdf.
5. For the purpose of this survey, the **targeted approach** refers to a selected segment of society receiving benefits or bearing the costs of a policy. For example, only the low-income group would receive subsidies or only the high-income group would have to pay taxes. The **universal, means-tested approach** refers to everyone in society receiving the benefits and bearing the costs, but the amount depends on their needs and abilities. Hence, lower-income citizens would receive more subsidies and pay less taxes, whereas higher-income citizens would receive less subsidies and pay more taxes. The **universal approach** refers to everyone receiving the same amount of benefits or bearing the same costs regardless of their income levels.
6. For details on methodology and questionnaire design, please visit www.cscollege.gov.sg/ethos.

Uniquely Singapore, Uniquely CPF

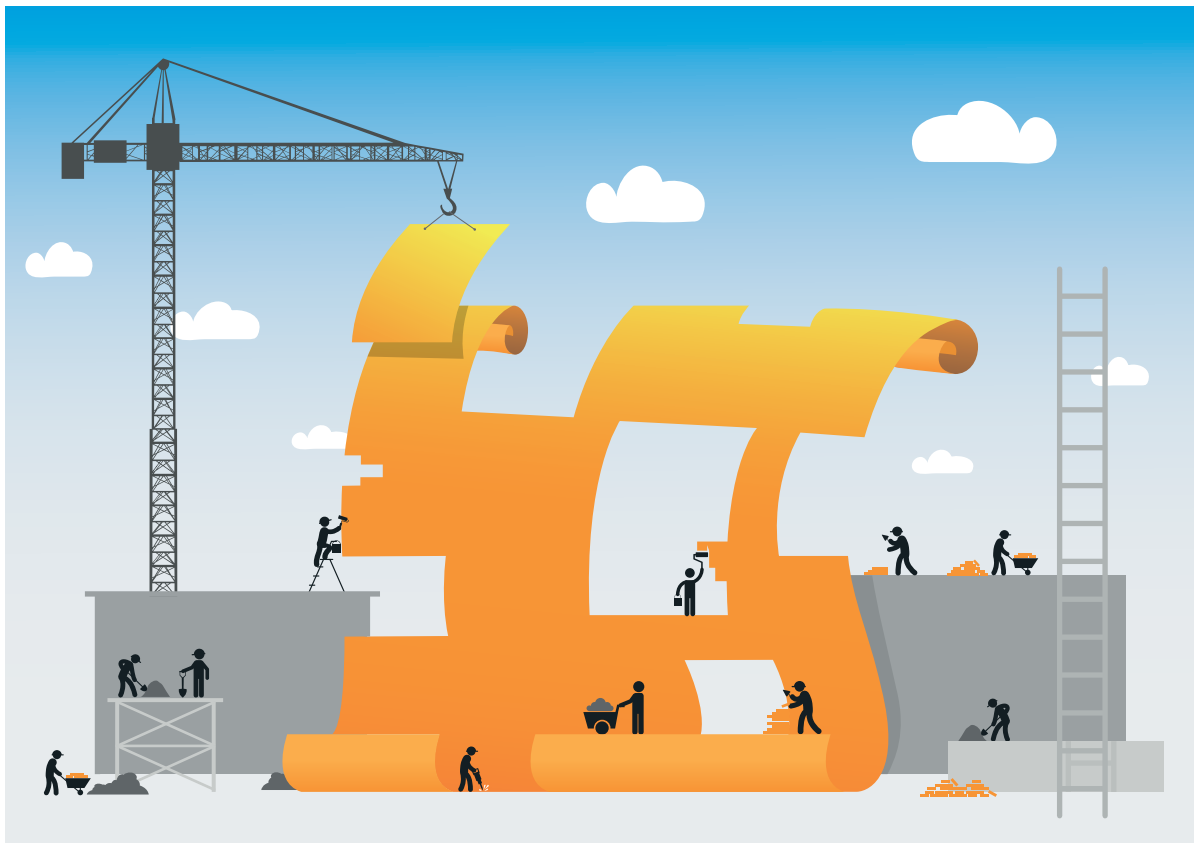
Singapore's pragmatic approach to social security has led to the development of a unique system that does not readily adhere to international benchmarks.

BY
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Background on the Singapore System

Singapore's social security system has co-evolved with its historical development. Given our unique position as a small and open economy with no natural resources, we have adopted a model, premised on self-reliance, that is more fiscally sustainable and conducive to economic competitiveness. This, however, does not mean that we adopt a laissez-faire stance towards social policy. Instead, the Government takes an activist approach, consciously designing social spending and subsidies in ways that reinforce both individual responsibility and collective responsibility, as part of a shared social compact.

While the Central Provident Fund (CPF)¹ provides for Singaporeans' basic retirement needs, our social policy adopts a holistic approach that extends beyond social security to also encompass social investment and social assistance (see box story on "Key Features of Singapore's Social Policy Framework").

A key guiding principle when designing and reviewing social programmes is fiscal sustainability. This issue has become particularly salient in recent years, given the number of pension schemes worldwide that are struggling to honour their pension obligations in the face of demographic pressures or poor investment returns.

In Singapore, modest levels of fiscal spending enable taxes to be kept low for the broad majority of Singaporeans while maintaining a progressive system of taxes and transfers. This also maintains the incentive for individuals to work and upgrade their skills, save for their retirement and other needs, and to take responsibility for their own families. This has not come at the expense of the well-being of Singaporeans. Our approach of social investment, social security and targeted social assistance has enabled Singapore to achieve positive social outcomes while keeping government expenditure and taxes

“This is not about leaving things to self-reliance, or about leaving families to face uncertainties on their own. It is a strategy of government support for efforts by individuals to learn and strive to achieve their aspirations, to own a home by working and paying down a loan, and to save for their retirement needs. It may be a paradox, but this paradox of active government support for self-reliance has to run through all our social policies.”

Deputy Prime Minister and then-Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam²

KEY FEATURES OF SINGAPORE'S SOCIAL POLICY FRAMEWORK

- 🔑 **Social security:** The key pillars of Singapore's social security system are: Home Ownership, the Central Provident Fund system (consisting of individual savings accounts under a fully-funded, defined contribution system), Healthcare Assurance, Workfare (income supplement for low-wage workers), and the recently introduced Silver Support Scheme (income supplement for the bottom 20% to 30% of elderly Singaporeans). Through the CPF, Singaporeans build up savings for their retirement and healthcare needs as well as housing purchases.
- 🔑 **Social investment:** The Government invests heavily in education and training (most recently with the introduction of SkillsFuture³) to ensure that Singaporeans are employable and can earn an income for themselves. Initiatives such as Workfare⁴ and Special Employment Credits⁵ are targeted to encourage the employment of low-wage workers and older workers respectively. The Government has also implemented an extensive public housing programme, enabling the great majority of Singaporeans, including low-income households, to own their homes. Home ownership promotes self-reliance, social mobility and financial security.
- 🔑 **Social assistance:** Targeted assistance reaches the needy and disadvantaged while minimising disincentives to work. Only those who cannot work and have no other financial means receive long-term aid, through the Public Assistance scheme. ComCare programmes help individuals get back on their feet in the short- to medium-term. Lower-income households also receive substantial healthcare subsidies, and can fall back on Medifund⁶ as a last resort if they cannot afford their medical bills. The permanent GST Voucher scheme provides cash, Medisave top-ups and utilities rebates for lower and middle-income Singaporeans on a regular basis.

relatively low. These positive outcomes include low unemployment, high home ownership rates and healthcare outcomes that are superior to those in many advanced countries.⁷

What Makes Singapore's Approach (and the CPF) Unique?

Started in 1955, Singapore's Central Provident Fund is a defined contribution system that is fully funded by contributions

from employers and employees. Contributions are held in three separate accounts — the Ordinary, Medisave and Special Accounts — which support Singaporeans' home-ownership, healthcare and retirement needs.

While CPF is a defined contribution scheme in substance, it differs from many other defined contribution schemes in design, coverage and risk sharing. So what makes Singapore's approach unique?

CPF Is Asset-based

Singapore complements the accumulation of cash savings for retirement with asset-based policies. A key component of this approach is allowing the use of CPF savings for housing purchases, with the Government also providing subsidised public housing and substantial housing grants to enable Singaporeans to own their own homes. This strategy has resulted in a home ownership rate of around 90%, with even lower-income households having substantial housing equity in their properties. Home ownership eliminates the need to worry about rental costs during one's retirement years; and housing assets can be monetised, if necessary, to supplement retirement income. This asset-based approach — as opposed to providing cash benefits to those in need — is consistent with the principle of self-reliance, with subsidies going towards asset development rather than consumption.⁸

CPF Is an Integrated Social Security System

CPF integrates several aspects of social security: retirement savings, healthcare financing, home ownership. Together with government schemes like Workfare and Silver Support, an individual can look forward to peace of mind in old age. There is also flexibility within the CPF system to allow a member to optimise the use of his savings. For example, the portion of CPF savings that is invested in property may be monetised when needed to enhance retirement income, while the monthly income that a CPF member receives in retirement will also help him to meet his out-of-pocket medical expenses in old age. CPF members can also transfer their CPF savings among family members to better support each other's retirement needs.

CPF integrates several aspects of social security: retirement savings, healthcare financing, home ownership.

CPF Helps Individuals to Manage Retirement Risks

Although CPF is a *defined contribution* (DC) scheme at heart, it has incorporated elements of risk pooling that are more common to *defined benefit* (DB) systems, resulting in an approach that is eclectic yet meets the retirement needs of Singaporeans. In particular, the way that the CPF addresses the two key

risks of investment and longevity is unusual among DC schemes.

In a typical DC scheme, the retirement savings built up in individual accounts is a function of the contributions received and the investment returns that these monies earn. Poor investment performance can severely affect the amount of savings available to the individual at retirement: in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, many DC participants saw the value of their retirement savings shrink dramatically due to investment losses. Furthermore, as life expectancies continue to rise and with many individuals underestimating their own life expectancy, DC participants also run the risk of exhausting their retirement monies while they are still alive — a phenomenon known as *longevity risk*.

In contrast, we carefully manage CPF members' exposure to investment and longevity risks:

- CPF monies, by default, are invested in special non-tradable government bonds known as Special Singapore Government Securities (SSGS). These bonds are issued by the Singapore Government, which has a triple-A credit rating. With Extra Interest for lower CPF balances and for older members, CPF members can earn up to 6% interest per annum on their CPF savings.⁹ CPF retirement savings currently earn a floor rate of 4% per annum which

protects CPF members when market returns are low.¹⁰ CPF monies are safeguarded because the SSGS are issued and guaranteed by the Singapore Government.

- To address longevity risk, a national annuity scheme called CPF LIFE was introduced in 2009. Previously, CPF members would receive an income stream for about 20 years from the CPF savings accumulated during one's working life. With increasing life expectancies, members faced the risk of outliving their savings. CPF members with at least \$60,000 at age 65 in their Retirement Account¹¹ will be automatically enrolled¹² in CPF LIFE, ensuring that members receive monthly payouts for as long as they live. The other feature of CPF LIFE is that payouts are commensurate with the amount of CPF savings committed to the scheme, which preserves the principle of individual responsibility.

CPF Has Redistributive and Progressive Features

While CPF is premised on self-reliance and individual savings, it includes redistributive and progressive features that benefit less well-off members. These include CPF housing grants and the Extra Interest on CPF savings introduced in 2008. In addition, the Workfare Income Supplement Scheme (WIS) encourages

low-wage workers to stay employed by providing a government transfer that supplements up to 30% of annual income for low-wage workers. The cash component of the WIS supplements their income, while the CPF component helps them build up their retirement savings. Under the WIS, more than \$670 million was disbursed as at end 2015 for work done in 2014, benefitting about 439,000 Singaporeans.

Since 2008, the Government has been providing a 1% additional interest on the first \$60,000 of a CPF member's balances. Since 2016, an additional 1% extra interest is paid on the first \$30,000 of CPF balances for members aged 55 and above. These measures help to boost members' monthly retirement payouts, especially for those with lower balances.

These features make the CPF an exception to the typical defined contribution scheme. It embodies both individual responsibility, as it is still first and foremost based on individuals saving for themselves, as well as collective responsibility, with its progressive elements and collective pooling of risk.

How Does Singapore's CPF Compare with Other Countries' Retirement Systems?

International comparisons typically apply a common set of evaluation criteria in order to ensure comparability and facilitate benchmarking. Such studies can

illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of different systems, but are less useful for appreciating how the unique features of each system have evolved to suit their respective contexts.

While CPF is premised on self-reliance and individual savings, it includes redistributive and progressive features that benefit less well-off members.

International comparisons of retirement income systems tend to focus on adequacy and sustainability. Adequacy refers to the level of benefits that the systems provide for old age needs, while sustainability refers to their ability to continue providing these benefits in the long term. While these are useful parameters in assessing the effectiveness of a retirement income system, the way in which each parameter is defined and applied will affect evaluations significantly.

For example, while sustainability indicators typically include the level of pension assets and public debt relative to GDP as well as demographic factors,¹³ it would not be meaningful to apply these parameters across the board. These metrics were originally designed for traditional pay-as-you-go DB systems that tend to be susceptible to demographic pressures (whereby contributions from a shrinking workforce are insufficient to

fund the pension payouts of a growing elderly population). Such metrics are less applicable for a fully-funded DC system such as the CPF, in which each member can only withdraw what he has set aside in his account.

International studies that focus only on cash savings for retirement would also underestimate the level of adequacy that the CPF provides, since it includes unique provisions for housing and healthcare that go beyond pure retirement needs alone. For instance, such studies tend to assume the need to incur expenditure on housing rental, which Singaporean retirees, who mostly own their homes, do not require. Indeed, many studies overlook the fact that many Singaporeans hold substantial housing equity (instead of liability) that they could potentially unlock in order to increase their retirement adequacy.

Singapore's approach to helping the needy is often not fully appreciated in international studies. While some countries provide generous welfare benefits to the elderly poor, there has been increasing concern over fiscal deficits and public debt levels, calling into question the sustainability of such schemes. In contrast, Singapore provides support for lower-income Singaporeans whilst maintaining a fiscal balance through schemes such as Workfare, substantial housing grants,

healthcare and education subsidies, and GST Vouchers.¹⁴ This has been recently bolstered by the introduction of the Silver Support Scheme in 2016, which complements Workfare as part of the fourth pillar of social security in Singapore. The Silver Support Scheme supplements the retirement incomes of the bottom 20% to 30% of older Singaporeans, just as Workfare supplements the incomes of the bottom 20% to 30% of working Singaporeans. As Singapore's approach is atypical, its social safety net may consequently be perceived by conventional measures to be less robust or sustainable than it actually is over the long term.

What's Next for Singapore's Social Security System and CPF?

The CPF is a uniquely Singaporean social security system, whose features have evolved over more than half a century to meet our particular context and values. It should continue to be refined to stay relevant and meet the current and future needs of Singaporeans.

While the main objective of the CPF remains to ensure that Singaporeans can meet their basic retirement needs, there is scope for the CPF to provide more options to cater to varying retirement needs of Singaporeans. In September 2014, the Government appointed a CPF Advisory Panel to

study possible enhancements for CPF members. The Panel released the first part of its recommendations in February 2015, which included giving members the flexibility to withdraw more as a lump sum upon retirement, deferring the starting age for their retirement payouts, and providing clearer choices over their desired level of retirement payouts and corresponding retirement sums to set aside. The Panel is in the process of studying how to provide an option for CPF members who prefer retirement payouts that start off

lower but increase over time to help with rising costs of living, and how to provide options for CPF members who wish to take on some investment risk in order to seek higher returns on their CPF savings.

To build a more inclusive and resilient society, the Government has signalled its commitment to enhance the CPF system and reinforce Singapore's social safety nets. These efforts will create a broader and more flexible social security system that protects Singaporeans over their lifetimes. 

NOTES

1. For a brief history of the CPF, see <https://www.cpf.gov.sg/Members/AboutUs/about-us-info/history-of-cpf>.
2. Speech by Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Deputy Prime Minister and then-Minister for Finance at the Academy of Medicine, August 23, 2013.
3. SkillsFuture is a national movement to enable all Singaporeans to develop their skills throughout life. It includes the SkillsFuture Credit, which can be used to offset the fees for a wide range of skills-related courses, the SkillsFuture Study Awards, and the SkillsFuture Mid-Career Enhanced Subsidy.
4. Workfare comprises the Workfare Income Supplement Scheme (WIS), which provides more income and CPF savings to older, low-income Singaporean workers when they stay employed, and the Workfare Training Support Scheme, which encourages these workers to attend training to improve their skills.
5. Under the Special Employment Credit (SEC) scheme, for Singaporean employees earning up to \$4,000 a month, the Government will cover up to 8% of the monthly wage of those above age 50, and up to 11% of the monthly wage for those aged 65 and above. The Government has also announced an extension of the Temporary Employment Credit up to 2017, which offsets up to 1% of wages (capped at the CPF salary ceiling), to alleviate the rise in business costs due to the increases in CPF contribution rates and CPF salary ceiling.
6. Medifund is an endowment fund set up by the Government in 1993, as a safety net to help needy Singaporeans who cannot afford to pay for their medical expenses, despite substantial bill subsidies. The other components of healthcare financing in Singapore are Medisave, where Singaporeans set aside a portion of their CPF savings for medical needs, and MediShield Life, a basic health insurance plan that covers all Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents for life, and which helps to pay for large hospital bills and selected costly outpatient treatments.

7. Singapore's unemployment is low and the annual average overall unemployment rate has been around 2.5% for the past 10 years. Singapore enjoys a high home ownership rate of about 90%. Singapore's healthcare outcomes have won accolades, see for example, Bryan R. Lawrence, "To Fix Medicare and Social Security, Look to Singapore", *The Washington Post*, August 17, 2012.
8. Citing Singapore's approach in his 2011 Sir Robert Menzies Lecture, Noel Pearson argues that *"...[Singapore] redistributed money to promote wealth and asset development, not consumption. The lesson here is subsidising consumption is fatal. By doing so you neutralise the most important incentive to strive and work."* Noel Pearson, "Proof of Welfare's Multiple Failings", *The Australian*, March 5, 2011.
9. CPF members earn up to 5% per annum on their Special, Medisave and Retirement Account monies, inclusive of an extra 1% interest paid on the first \$60,000 of a member's combined balances (with up to \$20,000 from the Ordinary Account). From January 2016, CPF members aged 55 and above also earn an additional 1% extra interest on the first \$30,000 of their combined balances (with up to \$20,000 from the Ordinary Account). As a result, CPF members aged 55 and above will earn up to 6% interest per year on their retirement balances.
10. There is currently an interest rate floor of 4% per annum on CPF savings for healthcare and retirement, while an interest rate guarantee of 2.5% per annum is in place for all CPF savings.
11. The Retirement Account is created for members when they reach age 55; savings from their Special and Ordinary Accounts would be transferred to the Retirement Account to form the Retirement Sum.
12. Members turning 55 from 2013 onwards are automatically enrolled in CPF LIFE, and are eligible to start their retirement payouts at age 65. Older members who turned 55 before 2013 can choose to opt into CPF LIFE.
13. Such demographic factors would include old-age dependency ratios and fertility rates.
14. The GST Voucher was introduced in Budget 2012. It is a permanent transfer scheme to help lower and middle-income households with their expenses, in particular, what they pay in Goods-and-Services Tax (GST). There are three components to the GST Voucher: Cash, Medisave and Utility-Save (or U-Save).



THE ETHOS ROUNDTABLE

Risk-Ready Leadership

Three distinguished participants from Singapore's 8th Leaders in Governance Programme share insights on how the public sector can embrace a more complex and uncertain world.

The ETHOS Roundtable was conducted by ETHOS Editor-in-Chief Alvin Pang in September 2015 with a group of participants in the 8th Leaders in Governance Programme (LGP) (24 August to 1 September 2015). Organised annually by the Civil Service College, the LGP draws from Singapore's development experience to offer practical insights into the fundamentals of good governance and effective policy implementation for sustainable economic development and social cohesion. Over the seven-day programme, participants interact with senior government officials and thought leaders, and visit key government agencies to understand their operating philosophies and values.

PARTICIPANTS

Mr Nikhil Seth, Executive Director, United Nations Institute for Training and Research

Ms Stephanie Foster, Deputy Public Service Commissioner, Australian Public Service Commission

Mr Said Faisal, Executive Director, ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster

On Important Developments in the Public Sector Today

Seth: In an earlier era, the relationship between the political leadership, the civil service and the public was based on benevolence, but this is no longer the case — information technology and social media have changed governance forever. Governments and civil services have had to be much more responsive to people's concerns, which have become much more apparent, demanding more urgent attention. This dramatic shift, from official benevolence to responsiveness to citizens' concerns,

is the major defining feature of public service today.

Foster: In Australia, the focus has been on the need for public service to be agile and flexible — features which haven't been traditionally associated with bureaucratic, hierarchical organisations. This is about being flexible and adaptive both in terms of the way in which we respond to a changing public environment, as well as the way we work with each other. We've talked a lot about the need to work across government, and working genuinely with citizens, private

sector and non-profit sectors. So it's moving away from what Nikhil terms an environment of *benevolence* towards one of more genuine *co-creation*, to use a current buzzword.

The question is no longer about managing the risk, but living with the risk.

This has enormous challenges for organisations that have not been used to working like that. But it also has enormous benefits, in the way we have been nudging the public to serve themselves — a concept more familiar in Singapore than in many other countries — so that we can meet the demand for service that is immediate, responsive and delivered in a way people want without expanding the public service. By harnessing the power of a more capable, educated public, we can, together, deliver a much higher level of service, and achieve all of the things that we want to do.

Said: At the end of the day, it is about what results we want to achieve. When you change the business model or your approach, you have to bear in mind whether the results you desire are achievable. I'm always worried when we change processes simply because

others are changing the process, just so we can join the club. But if this is at the expense of the results we want, then I think we have to differ. We have to understand what works for us — we cannot let the process become the objective in itself. I think there will be trade-offs.

With all the rapid changes in the world, the question is no longer about managing the risk, but living with the risk. In this context, the ability to adapt becomes important — but adapting also entails sacrifice, changing the way we do things, which is the toughest thing to do. People understand that there is no victory without sacrifice. Good leaders will define what victory means, and what the cost is.

Seth: The purpose of governance is to enhance the wellbeing of your citizenry. But public wellbeing is a very complex interplay of forces which act upon peoples' economic aspirations, as well as social aspirations. People want decent jobs. They want security. They want opportunities. But they also want their families to do well. They want to move up the social ladder. They want to overcome discrimination, explicit or implicit. They want to live in a good environment, with peace and security.

All these forces act so indivisibly across various spheres that the issues have to be seen in their complexity and to be tackled simultaneously in order to enhance well-being.

In the past, we have tackled these forces in certain silos. There are ministries that look after economic prosperity, employment; others look after social inclusion, law and order, and so on. But all these forces act so indivisibly across various spheres that the issues have to be seen in their complexity and to be tackled simultaneously in order to enhance well-being. The old silo approaches of segmenting economic issues, social issues, environmental issues and peace and security issues are no longer possible.

So the ability of governance to see inter-relationships and to optimise policy, to see where resources are best spent, so that these complex forces which act upon the individual can be simultaneously addressed, is the key challenge in most governance systems and in all societies and economies today.

On Balancing Short- and Long-Term Public Goals

Foster: For any country, but particularly those of us who are relatively small, having the agility to uphold competing priorities and drivers and manage them all simultaneously will become critical to our success. Like Singapore, we shouldn't ever let ourselves be forced into binary choices.

In the Singaporean context, what I found striking was the importance and the extent of alignment between the elected government, the civil service and the people. Obviously that is partly

to do with having the same party in power for so long.

But often in Australia, we bemoan the difficulty we have sustaining long-term planning and in fact, we're working very hard to reskill our public service to not blame politics for stopping them from doing what is our real job, which is to plan long-term sustained futures in all of our policy areas.

Policy without execution is hallucination.

Like anything in life, you got to work with what you have, and so if ministers or governments have particular political drivers, then you've got to find a way of achieving the best you can within that framework. Part of our job as civil servants is to give the government options that they can work with, rather than saying this is the ideal, but we are never going to get that through because the politics will interfere. It's one of the biggest challenges but also one of the most exciting things about public sector work: to get the best solution possible through the politics of the day.

Seth: In many of our countries, the political discourse is being hijacked — the whole political conversation ends up being about peripheral issues. But Singapore has managed to keep the political discourse around the well-being of its people, on looking ahead, and the different approaches of

getting there, so you can have a vision for the next fifty years — that's the kind of planning most countries need but short-term politics don't allow to happen. Nevertheless, the forces that are driving change in the world will have a deep impact, and they need to be planned for now.

Said: The model of long-term planning in Singapore is about anticipating change. Long-term planning is not just a slogan, but a carefully designed, robust process with many stakeholders. It is also oriented towards producing outcomes we want, not long-term planning for its own sake. But I think what separates good from average is the discipline of execution, which is lacking in many other countries. The general assumption is that those at the high level focus on the big picture, the softer aspects. But we have learnt is that whether you are high level or low, you need to understand what it takes to get things done. You can have great plans or ideas but it's the discipline of execution that makes a difference between one organisation to another, one country to another. Policy without execution is hallucination. Everyone feels good about it but actually nothing happens.

This is where good leadership makes the difference. A good leader tells you what victory looks like, and what it will take to get there. You can let market mechanisms work, in which you get good leaders sometimes, and different leaders at other times. But I believe good leadership is manufactured — it is a deliberate process, at all levels. This is why the Civil Service College in Singapore is remarkable: it is a system for creating public sector leaders.

Foster: Many people and many organisations tend to make a choice between being either thinkers or doers; focused on the future or focused on details. All of these are equally important and without all of these elements, you get a far less desirable result. Not any one person will have all of those things, but it's our responsibility to make sure they are in the system. Leaders bring that all together.

On Desired Qualities of Leadership

Seth: Care and responsiveness are two qualities which are to me emblematic of great leadership. Through being caring and being responsive, good leaders create an atmosphere of trust; people trust in the decisions you make. This is important, because tough decisions require trade-offs and sacrifices. If the people are convinced that this is happening for their well-being and welfare, and the leader cares for them

The two things that leaders really need to be good at, and cannot delegate away, are the questions of “what” and of “why”.

and is trying to build trust with them, I think the society will do well.

Said: In the end, the two things that leaders really need to be good at, and cannot delegate away, are the questions of “what” and of “why”. They are difficult questions: “Why do we want to achieve as you wish?”; “What do you want to see in the next five years?”; “What does Singapore want to be in the next 50 years?”. Leaders really need to understand the “what” and the “why”. You can delegate the “how” — it is technical. But the “what” and the “why” need to be solid.

We need a sense that constructive engagement with risk is what makes us relevant and responsive.

Foster: Public servants can fall into the habit of thinking that they are all about the “how”, while the political masters determine the direction, which we just implement. But the vision in Singapore is one of the public service in partnership with the government to shape the country’s future. This means

that the public service has a responsibility to actually help determine the “what”, and then equipping people to do the “how” really well.

In that regard, we need leaders who are blazing the trail, not following the past in different guises. It goes to what was raised earlier about the question of risk, and how every success involves sacrifice. In the public services, I think is important to learn to embrace risks, and engage with risk as a core part of our business, not as something to manage on the side. At one point during the LGP course, we talked about not being firefighters but venture capitalists. Venture capitalists operate by taking risk, by doing it sensibly, methodically, with a good evidence base and so on. Fundamentally, they have to be at the forefront in order to succeed at all.

In the same way, we need the same kind of entrepreneurial spirit in the public sector. We need a sense that constructive engagement with risk is what makes us relevant and responsive, rather than being averse to risk and treating it like the scary monster in the closet. If we can crack this as a public service, as part of being good leaders, it will propel us into the future. ✧

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