

IPS Corporate Associates Lunch: Four Former NMPs Reflect on Their Time in the House

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The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) organised a Corporate Associates lunch dialogue on 16 September 2014 featuring four former Nominated Members of Parliament (NMPs) – Ms Faizah Jamal, Ms Janice Koh, Associate Professor (Assoc Prof) Eugene Tan and Mr Laurence Lien who completed their terms in August 2014. Discussions ranged from the work and legacy of these members, to the relevance and impact of the NMP Scheme on Singapore’s parliamentary and broader political system.

A Progress Report

Dr Gillian Koh, Senior Research Fellow of the Politics and Governance cluster at IPS invited the former NMPs to reflect on their time in Parliament; assess the sort of progress they witnessed in public policy areas that they were concerned about; and to comment on whether there was any “unfinished business” they felt should be pursued.



In Photo: Mr Laurence Lien

Mr Lien, Chairman of the Lien Foundation and former Chief Executive Officer of the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre (NVPC), said he had set out to focus on social issues and the relationship between people and the government in his term as NMP. It was the Chairman of NVPC at that time, Mr Stanley Tan who convinced him that the post-General Election (GE) 2011 climate was favourable for such discussions, and urged him to take on the role. Mr Lien is remembered for saying that Singapore faced a “social recession” and needed a “social reset” and “social renaissance”. These terms caught on, he said, because there were members of the public who felt that the issues he raised had not received sufficient attention. Since then, he has noted how in policy, the government has worked towards improving the lot of low-wage workers; and in tone, the social takes precedence over the economic in important political speeches like Prime

Minister's National Day Rally and his Chinese New Year messages – something rather different from the case previously.

Nonetheless, many of these social issues are still work-in-progress. One example is the area of community ownership, where citizens have a greater stake in issues and do more for themselves. The state had been slow in allowing for greater citizen participation and empowerment for fear of the “messiness” and possible accusations that it was not doing its job, he said. Mr Lien related how he was criticised for speaking in that vein as his detractors thought he was allowing the government to shirk its responsibilities. In this sense, citizens had also contributed to an over-dependency on the state.



In photo: Ms Janice Koh

Ms Koh, a celebrated stage and television actor, had three broad areas she wanted to focus on as NMP. The first of these was to bring a cultural perspective to the work of Parliament — to look at the progress of Singapore through a cultural lens. On this front, the government has since introduced a Cultural Matching Fund to boost philanthropy for the arts. Another development is that there is now a consciousness about heritage conservation, with the discussion of sacred spaces that Singaporeans connect with emotionally and sentimentally. A third development is the decentralisation of state control in relation to the creative sector with the Singapore Arts Festival now being independently run.

The second area of focus for Ms Koh was to be a bridge between the creative sector on one side and the government and Parliament on the other. Many in the arts, media, cultural and heritage sectors felt cut off from Parliament as issues pertaining to them were rarely brought up in the House. As far as it was possible, Ms Koh met with members of these sectors to understand their concerns and articulate them in Parliament. She helmed the Our Singapore Conversation sessions with these sectors and facilitated discussions with the Media Development Authority on its proposed and controversial Arts Term Licensing Scheme, which was eventually withdrawn.

The third area of focus for Ms Koh was to try and illustrate the significance of mainstreaming the arts, and the importance of arts, culture and heritage issues to the country. For her, what remained “unfinished business” was the idea of widening the space for civic discourse. There was also the need to encourage Singaporeans to be innovative, to take risks and handle the messy and chaotic so that they can develop their cultural capacity and creative confidence.



In photo: Ms Faizah Jamal

Next, Ms Faizah shared that she was gratified that the concept of conducting Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) gained ground in the government sector during her term as NMP. An adjunct lecturer with the Republic Polytechnic, a former corporate lawyer and a long-standing member of the Nature Society (Singapore), Ms Faizah said it was surprising that the concept of EIA was so under-developed until now. As far as “unfinished business” was concerned, Ms Faizah said that she had sought to make all persons — be they parliamentarians or members of the public — see environmentalism as the foundation for everything else in Singapore. Her biggest takeaway from her term as an NMP was learning how to convey these notions of environmentalism to people of different backgrounds and from different sectors.

Assoc Prof Tan, who lectures at the School of Law, Singapore Management University, thought that the issues of the day discussed in Parliament often defined the role of the NMP. He said that the NMPs did not set the agenda for the House, so the most important impact of an NMP was made outside of Parliament in how NMPs challenged the government and Singaporeans to think deeper and harder on the issues debated. He believed that the current 12th Parliament would be critical as the next GE would be the watershed election, and not the 2011 GE like most thought it was.

In his term, the debate on the government’s White Paper, “A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore” (henceforth “Population White Paper”) dominated the discussion in the House. Assoc Prof Tan said he did not have any “unfinished business” as he had no specific agenda as NMP. He chose to speak up on immigration issues because of the pervasive influence it had on life in Singapore. He commented on the need for Singapore universities to ensure that their human resource policies did not discriminate against Singaporeans; for example, if a Singapore academic changed his Singapore passport to a foreign one, the pay increment would be immediate and fairly substantial.



In photo: Assoc Prof Eugene Tan

Dr Koh pointed out that Assoc Prof Tan had abstained from voting on the Population White Paper and also that the other NMPs on the platform had voted against it. Assoc Prof Tan said that he had spoken against the Population White Paper, but after the Prime Minister pledged that his government was committed to addressing key issues that Assoc Prof Tan was concerned about, the latter decided to abstain in the vote on the motion. The abstention signalled that he was “keeping an open mind”, given the imperative of immigration for demographic and economic reasons. Coming from his background as a constitutional law academic, Assoc Prof Tan also felt he had spoken up on the several occasions when the quorum was not met in the House.

Continuing the Process of Social Change

A participant asked whether the former NMPs present would consider standing as candidates to become independent Members of Parliament (MPs) and bring further progress to the issues they cared about. Mr Lien and Assoc Prof Tan indicated that they did not have an interest in party politics, and it was also difficult in Singapore to be elected as independents as proper party machinery was needed to support such an effort. Both Mr Lien and Assoc Prof Tan had highlighted earlier that NMPs are not subject to the party whip unlike the elected MPs and therefore could more effectively be barometers of public sentiment and concern. Ms Koh said that she was not keen on politics and would not run as an independent MP. She said that she entered the NMP role with a fairly clear agenda and timeline in mind. As such, she tried to make the most of her term. Ms Faizah said one should “never say never”, as she had never thought of even being an NMP some three years ago.

Furthermore, both Ms Koh and Ms Faizah were optimistic that the change they wanted to see in their areas of interest had begun and would continue beyond their formal terms as NMPs. Ms Koh said that in her term as an NMP, she held many dialogue sessions with members of the creative community. This provided the opportunity to find touch points within the creative sectors and encourage its members to become community organisers in and of themselves. This was certainly true with the recent establishment of a musicians’ guild. Ms Faizah shared that for her, it was more important that she had planted the seeds for an interest in environmental issues to develop, and did not wish to lean too much towards a results-oriented approach. She spoke about ecoyouth (Singapore), a youth group that was spawned when its founding members were so provoked like Ms Faizah that the Population White Paper had no regard for the environment.

A participant asked Ms Koh if she thought that Singaporeans were ready for movies that raise sensitive issues like the recently banned film *To Singapore with Love*, and that it was the government that was not ready for citizens to “grow up”. Ms Koh said that this incident

was indeed a lost opportunity; it was *not* that Singaporeans were unready, but that the government was not prepared to discuss the issues raised by the movie, recognising of course that the film dealt with some of the more controversial points of the country's history. Mr Lien added that this episode signalled how the government had a fear of messiness and losing control.

The NMP Scheme and the Parliamentary System

Other questions from the audience centred on how the NMP Scheme affected Singapore's parliamentary and political system. The comparison between full MPs that have political constituents, and the perception that NMPs do not was also discussed.

Ms Koh felt that she was representing an interested and increasingly vocal constituency, after all the arts-based candidates for the NMP Scheme were themselves elected by and therefore accountable to a caucus of arts practitioners. If that were the case then Ms Koh felt it was only right to consult with members of the sector and reflect their views as the Arts NMP.

Following from her earlier point, Ms Faizah on the other hand saw the general Singaporean public as her constituency as she aimed to raise the level of environmental consciousness across the country. She did not agree with former MP Dr Tan Cheng Bock's view that NMPs did not have constituents and were thus accountable to no one. She was accountable to the Nature Society that had selected her to take on that task.

Assoc Prof Tan said that from the perspective of constitutional law, NMPs really did not represent any one as the so-called constituents did not have any recognised legal capacity to vote for their candidates to be NMPs. Neither could they have their functional group of NMPs account for their parliamentary performance. This of course, did not reduce the responsibility that NMPs have of speaking up in a responsible manner and pushing boundaries where they could.

The discussion also touched on the role of the NMP and the political opposition, as well as its impact on the breadth of issues debated in Parliament. Ms Koh said that in the case of the National Library Board controversy¹, more than two-thirds of the questions raised in Parliament were by NMPs; the debate would have been more muted otherwise. Assoc Prof Tan agreed that there were issues that were unrewarding for elected MPs to pursue, and there was a role for NMPs in this regard. Ms Koh added that NMPs do put some pressure on MPs to talk about certain issues; their questions do compel the elected MPs to look at big-picture issues in addition to those that are of interest to their local constituencies.

In response to a follow-up question on whether NMPs could be stronger, and perhaps even stand up to ministers, and whether NMPs helped to strengthen the democratic process or undermine it, Mr Lien said that democracy was a work-in-progress and hoped there would come a day in Singapore where there would be no need for NMPs — where the issues he and the other former NMPs were concerned about would be taken up by mainstream political actors. Ms Faizah said she would like to think that she has allies and fellow

¹ The National Library Board had removed books on alternative lifestyles from the shelves of the children's section of its libraries, which resulted in considerable public debate on the role of the library.

“greenies” in Parliament. Assoc Prof Tan said that since NMPs were non-partisan, not subject to the party whip, they could speak their minds.

Dr Koh closed the session by congratulating the former NMPs for successful terms where their contributions to the discussion of several areas of public policy as well as the practice of democratic governance in Singapore were patently clear.

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