

IPS Corporate Associates Lunch: Lee Kuan Yew's Public Service – What has Changed and What will Continue to Change?

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What are the fundamental principles undergirding our public service today and how were these shaped by the first Prime Minister of independent Singapore, Mr Lee Kuan Yew? These were discussed by Mr Eddie Teo, Chairman of the Public Service Commission (PSC), at a lunch dialogue with members of the Institute of Policy Studies ([IPS Corporate Associates programme](#)) on 21 April 2015. IPS Director Janadas Devan moderated the dialogue.

Singapore's Three Pillars of Governance

Mr Teo began by elaborating on the three abiding values of Singapore's system of governance — the pillars of incorruptibility, meritocracy and impartiality.

He said there was already a strong ethos of incorruptibility when he joined the civil service in the 1970s. When quizzed recently by Mr David Rivkin, president of the International Bar Association, on how Singapore's public service sustained its non-tolerance for corruption, Mr Teo pointed to Singapore's political leaders. "Public servants watched and followed the example shown by our political masters. We were incorruptible because they were incorruptible," he said. He added that the national narrative of vulnerability and survival was an inspiring one that galvanised the civil service. "Money as a form of incentive played no role then," he recalled.

On meritocracy, Mr Teo noted that Mr Lee made a fundamental change to the civil service that the People's Action Party (PAP) government inherited from the British. He replaced the system of seniority-based promotions to one based on merit, regardless of age. Mr Teo recalled that he was made director of the Security and Intelligence Division of the Ministry of Defence at the age of 31. When he met a Japanese intelligence chief, the gentleman remarked that Mr Teo was as "young as his grandson". Promotion in the civil service, Mr Teo said, is not based on academic results but on job performance.

Mr Teo described impartiality as being most important for public service delivery. The public service must serve a multiracial and an increasingly diverse and complex Singapore impartially, he said. In order to cater to this diversity, a diverse public service comprising students from different schools in different countries studying different subjects is needed too.

He noted that more scholarship applicants were coming from other schools and the polytechnics, and not just the top schools of Raffles Institution and Hwa Chong Institution. He said that he would not be surprised to see a President's Scholar coming from the School of the Arts before he retires in three years' time.

Future Developments

Mr Teo outlined several scenarios that the public service might face in the coming years. First, the changing political landscape could reshape the current relationship between public servants and the political leadership. Public servants have in recent years been helping government ministers communicate public policies, beyond formulating and implementing them. As a result, what they say may be viewed as a justification of the party line.

This blurring of roles was not a concern in earlier years when there was scant possibility of another political party taking over government from the PAP. But since the 2011 General Election, younger public servants have expressed concern about what to do "if there are more and more Opposition MPs in Parliament or even if there is a change in political party, and not just in government, maybe a few General Elections from now," said Mr Teo. He added that even in more stable two-party democracies such as the United Kingdom, where there are rules to help public servants transition to a new government, such change would not necessarily happen smoothly.

Second, it would be crucial to maintain the public's trust in the civil service, and for civil servants to not come across as elitist. Social media had heightened the impact of "insensitive comments" made by a few PSC scholarship holders, he said. Growing income inequality in Singapore was also an issue. There were concerns that the bulk of PSC scholarship holders were from better-off families. But applying affirmative action and only giving PSC scholarships to the poor would not address the "unfair advantages the rich enjoy over the poor," he said, adding that concrete measures to help lower-income students level up should be implemented earlier in their lives.

Mr Teo said that he was concerned about "one downside of meritocracy" in Singapore, in that it gave rise to a belief that one had succeeded on one's own merit. "We must not believe in our own propaganda and stay humble to remain good public servants. Nobody succeeds in the public service, or life for that matter, without the support of other people," he noted.

Mr Teo ended his speech by saying that Singaporeans would need to decide in the future if the scholarship system is still critical to maintaining an effective public service. "If our political leaders continue to be principled pragmatists, they will continue to fight for its retention if it still works well and there is no better alternative. And if the public is right and the system has outlived its usefulness, why keep it?" he said.

Question and Answer Session

The questions posed to Mr Teo during the 30-minute question-and-answer session ranged from the selection process of scholarship recipients by the PSC, to whether today's young civil servants were different from those in the past.

Mr Teo said the PSC comprised those from the private sector who are heads of various successful private companies. As Chairman of the PSC, he listens to their views during interviews and cannot select scholars on his own. The PSC, he said, does not only look for people whose views are deemed acceptable. In fact, he said the “worst candidates” were those who gave answers they thought the PSC wanted to hear, as it showed that they lacked principles and convictions. “The selection process is robust enough so that we don’t just pick clones,” he said.

Secondly, he said the public service had tried to get people from outside the service to join because they seemed like “mavericks” who would question assumptions. This has, however, proven difficult, because they either do not stay or end up behaving like stereotypical civil servants after a time in service.

Another member of the audience asked Mr Teo which other public service in the world Singapore could learn from. What were the main weaknesses of our public service, and did it encourage a culture of conformity, he asked. Mr Teo conceded that more creative and innovative people were needed in the public service, but it was not easy to find these people — a problem that Singapore’s private sector also had to deal with. Mr Devan said he took a different view, citing Singapore’s home ownership success and the creation of GIC as examples of “bold, audacious ideas that our civil service put in place.” To the audience member’s first question, Mr Teo highlighted the Canadian public service because of the similar issues they were grappling with as their Singaporean counterparts.

Asked if the perception of the civil service being an “iron rice bowl” was correct, Mr Teo said no. Employees who consistently underperformed were removed from the public service but he acknowledged that compared to the private sector, the process of dismissal would take longer.

The text of Mr Teo’s remarks can be found on [IPSCommons](#).

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