

A Night of Celebration and Joyful Reflection

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Living up to its theme of “A celebration of joyful reflection”, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) 25th Anniversary Gala Dinner, held at the Shangri-La Hotel on 1 October 2013, resembled a class reunion with old friends and former colleagues catching up with one another and reminiscing about the many good years with IPS.

The dinner was graced by former Singapore President S R Nathan, Emeritus Senior Minister (ESM) Goh Chok Tong and Mrs Goh, Prof. Wang Gungwu, Chairman of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP) Governing Board and Mrs Wang, Prof. Tommy Koh and Mrs Koh, and close to 500 benefactors and distinguished guests.

The gathering was addressed by IPS Director Janadas Devan, followed by Prof. Chan Heng Chee, the Founding Director of IPS, and ESM Goh.



(From left) Prof. Jon Quah, Mr Ong Keng Yong, Prof. Chan Heng Chee, Prof. Wang Gungwu, ESM Goh Chok Tong, Mr S R Nathan, Prof. Tommy Koh, Mr Janadas Devan, Dr Lee Tsao Yuan and Mr Arun Mahizhnan raising a toast during the cake-cutting ceremony.

Genesis of IPS

IPS Director Janadas Devan delivered the welcome address where he described the context in which IPS was founded 25 years ago. With governance becoming increasingly complex, then first deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong felt that Singapore would benefit from having established and nurtured institutions devoted to the study of public policy as a discipline in itself. Public policy was too important, too intricate, too involved, and too complex to be left to public servants alone. Mr Devan took the opportunity to express his gratitude to “IPS’ true begetter” ESM Goh.

Mr Devan added that before IPS became part of the LKYSPP in 2008, it was run by an independent board. Its first Chairman was former Chief Justice Yong Pung How, followed by Mr Hsuan Owyang and Prof. Tommy Koh. Mr Devan thanked them for their contributions as well as IPS board members for their services.

Also on his tribute list were his predecessors, the former Directors and Acting Directors of IPS: Prof. Chan Heng Chee, Prof. Jon Quah, Prof. Tommy Koh, Dr Lee Tsao Yuan, Mr Arun Mahizhnan and Ambassador Ong Keng Yong. Receiving special mention was Prof. Koh who had served as the Director of IPS for two stints. Mr Devan explained that every major IPS event would receive the support of former staff who had left the Institute a decade ago or more — this *esprit de corps* is Prof. Koh’s creation above all.

Finally, Mr Devan took the opportunity to announce the establishment of the S R Nathan Fellowship for the Study of Singapore. Named after Singapore’s sixth and longest-serving president, this is the first named fellowship in a research institute in Singapore.

Founding Director as Pathfinder

At the anniversary gala, Prof. Chan Heng Chee, in her speech, observed that IPS has carved a place for itself as the institute that focuses on Singapore issues and seeks to understand what is happening in the polity. She added that IPS’ nation-wide surveys are avidly followed and its analyses of population attitudes are viewed as independent and objective. She pointed out that the large audience that was present to celebrate with IPS on its 25th anniversary was an indication of “the place of IPS in people’s hearts and minds”.

On the genesis of the Institute, Prof. Chan expressed that it was her privilege to set up IPS as its first director. In 1988, she was asked to meet with then Deputy Prime Minister Goh who wanted to experiment in opening up Singapore’s political space. He thought if an institute could be established to encourage discussion and to take in diverse views on policy in Singapore, the government could find the feedback useful and incorporate some of the ideas into their decision-making. This vision was developed at a time when the number of intellectuals and professionals was growing and wanted to be heard. The prevailing political environment then was one whereby the government was perceived as intolerant of alternative views.

In the formative years of the Institute, academics, professionals and business leaders who found some aspects of policies lacking were persuaded to come to IPS to share their views. IPS was positioned not as a feedback unit, but as a stand-alone policy institute, which was something new to Singapore. Initially, academics were horrified, Prof. Chan revealed,

believing that policy involvement would taint their scholarship. The opposite is true in today's context, with policy-oriented research being conducted everywhere, including in top universities.

If she were to do it all over again, Prof. Chan said that she would have organised IPS more tightly and canvassed greater support from the bureaucracy and political levels from the start. However, in those days, not many had experience in running a think tank. Nevertheless, IPS was kick-started and it did develop further. The political public got used to the idea that there was this institution called IPS and that it was dedicated to discussing Singapore issues.



Past and present IPS members gathering onstage after the conclusion of the gala dinner for a family portrait.

Tributes and Surprises

The evening had several other nice touches — a celebratory cake was cut by an august group including Mr Nathan, ESM Goh and Prof. Wang, with a supporting cast of all the directors of IPS, past and present. The guests were also treated to a delightful musical performance by the Jeremy Monteiro Trio with Melissa Tham. The highlight was perhaps the surprise tokens of appreciation presented to two IPS colleagues: Mr Mazlan Bin Mahmood, Operations Associate at IPS, and Ms Cynthia Lin, Personal Assistant to Visiting Scholar, LKYSPP and Special Research Adviser, both of who have been with IPS since its birth and personify the spirit Prof. Koh spoke of: “What makes IPS unique is the people. We have a remarkable family of colleagues who are loyal, who work harmoniously with one another and have created a unique *esprit de corps*.”

Excerpts of IPS Patron ESM Goh Chok Tong's Speech

"It gives me great pleasure to join you here tonight to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS). That we have come to this milestone is a testament to the dedication of successive IPS directors, researchers and staff, and the support of friends, both corporate and individuals. Without your belief in the mission of IPS, we would not be here today.

When IPS was established in 1988, our socio-political milieu was beginning to change. We had been a nation for less than 25 years, and our style of governance was very much top-down. The priorities for the country were security, stability, social harmony, economic growth and basic livelihood issues. The policies and solutions that the government advocated were clear necessities which most Singaporeans could agree with and support. They had also benefitted directly from these policies and programmes.

But even then, there was a sense that the government and public sector could not possibly have a monopoly on good ideas. Though there were capable people in the government, there were also many bright and able minds outside the public sector. I felt that the government would benefit by mining the wealth of expertise and experience of individuals and organisations outside. Moreover, Singaporeans also wanted to have a say on where the country was going.

In establishing IPS, I had in mind an independent think-tank to offer credible alternative views on government policies. Better still, if this think tank could identify important areas which the government might have overlooked or not yet paid sufficient attention to. This way, it could help the government avoid being blind-sided. IPS would also provide a platform for mature, open, and incisive discussion on Singapore's challenges, options and direction. It would engage concerned and thoughtful Singaporeans.

The need for this platform is even greater now than 25 years ago. Singapore's socio-political milieu has evolved further. Younger Singaporeans are better educated, more travelled, have high aspirations and expect more of the government. Their baseline in life is today's Singapore, not yesterday's struggles. Politically, Singapore is also more open and pluralistic. Moreover, the Internet and social media have flattened the traditional hierarchies of society and authority.

In my recent Marine Parade National Day Dinner speech, I had spoken about the need for Singapore to change the way we govern ourselves, and to be more collaborative in the face of these challenges. PM also spoke about the need to strike a new balance between the individual, community and government during his National Day Rally. Think tanks like IPS can play a crucial role in facilitating the engagement between citizens and the government in this more complex environment. They are invaluable in providing insights and alternative opinions to encourage informed discussions about key issues of the day.

Advancing such policy conversations requires specific domain knowledge and deeper, more detailed discussion. It means creating new platforms for Singaporeans to brainstorm and discuss challenges, policy ideas and solutions, to debate the merits and demerits of alternative options, and to raise awareness among the public of the factors and considerations that go into making national policies. I recognise that IPS already has many such platforms, including its flagship Singapore Perspectives, the Young Singaporeans Conference, and the Singapore Economic Roundtable. It heartens me that IPS is continuing to innovate to reach out and engage the public.

In the online world, IPS must strive to carve a place for itself as a source of credible, incisive and even critical views on issues that matter to Singaporeans, for at least two reasons.

First, the online media space is increasingly where people express their views and perspectives on challenges facing Singapore society. The views may not always be thoughtful but reflect knee-jerk and gut reactions. Nevertheless, they reflect the mood and views of a section of our society that we should not ignore. At the same time, there are also well-argued views online, some of which are in agreement with government policies and others which are opposed to government policies. We should do more to tap on the views of not only academic experts and those with domain expertise, but also insightful commentators, whether they operate in offline or online spaces. Where it is in line with IPS' objectives, IPS should do more to proactively engage online media practitioners.

Second, IPS' mission to inform the public on issues of national interest will be incomplete if it does not harness social media as a channel of communication. The Internet is a freeway that IPS must drive on. IPS' presence on the Internet will contribute to the diversity and richness of the public policy discourse, online as well as offline. I urge IPS to continue innovating in the social media space, to expand its reach and promote informed discussion on issues of common, national interest, and to distil ideas so that they can be readily accessible to policy makers and interested members of the public.

Studying Singapore is a serious and important endeavour. If we don't devote resources and energies into studying Singapore, who will? We also want to help Singaporeans make better sense of the tectonic changes affecting our society, and what it means to them individually and the country. To do this well, IPS must continuously stay ahead of the curve with its intellectual products and programmes.

IPS needs both human and material resources to achieve this. I am glad that IPS enjoys the direct support of some 70 corporate associates. They have helped to fund a large part of IPS' programmes and activities. Many of these corporate associates are represented here tonight. Some of you have been supporting IPS since its establishment 25 years ago, and I encourage you to continue doing so in the years ahead. On IPS' part, it should target to grow its pool of corporate associates to 100.

IPS also needs to attract more quality researchers. I am glad to note that, since IPS' merger with the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy five years ago, it has been able to increase its research capabilities by bringing on board more academic staff, with diverse research interests. The quality of output will be the key determinant of IPS' ability to deliver on its mission.

In conclusion, looking back at 25 years of IPS' history, I am satisfied at the useful role it has played in advancing serious public discourse on issues facing Singapore. I congratulate you once again and thank the Board of Directors, staff members, corporate associates and individuals who have contributed to IPS in one way or another. May IPS grow and contribute to a more vibrant Singapore."

If you have comments or feedback, please email ips.eneews@nus.edu.sg



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