

IPS Corporate Associates Lunch with Mr SR Nathan 22 February 2012

By Rachel Hui
IPS Research Assistant

On 22 February 2012, forty IPS Corporate Associates attended a special lunch dialogue at the Regent Hotel with Mr SR Nathan, the sixth President of the Republic of Singapore. Mr Nathan was invited by IPS to share his reflections on the wide range of issues he dealt with over the course of his illustrious career in the public service. Over a frank dialogue with participants on his experiences, the former president recounted many of the highlights and challenges faced during his time as an early member of the Labour Movement and later



Former President SR Nathan

National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), as a long serving leader in the Singapore Civil Service in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and in the Security and Intelligence Department at the Ministry of Defence, as Executive Chairman of the Straits Times Press, Director of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, and finally, as the sixth President of Singapore.

SR Nathan Professorial Fellowship in Public Policy

To honour the immense contribution made by former President Nathan to public service in Singapore, IPS also announced that it would be seeking to endow a Distinguished Professorial Fellowship in his name – the SR Nathan Professorial Fellow in Public Policy, the first of its kind for IPS.

Words of Wisdom for Young Singaporeans

IPS Director Mr Janadas Devan paid tribute to Mr Nathan's dedication to serving his country throughout the "astonishing trajectory" of his public career – from "office boy" to "chief of state".¹ In light of both the accomplishments and hardship experienced in his eventful life journey, one participant asked Mr Nathan if there were important lessons the 86-year-old former president would like to impart to a younger generation of Singaporeans. Mr Nathan said that young Singaporeans must remember that the development of Singapore today as they knew it was not "pre-ordained". Many in Singapore's founding generation had endured a great deal of adversity in order to establish a foothold of success for subsequent generations. He noted that younger Singaporeans might inevitably treat experiences of hardship in the past as mere stories, without fully appreciating their value. But having run

¹ For IPS Director Mr Janadas Devan's opening remarks, please visit: xxx

away from home in his youth and survived the Japanese Occupation, Mr Nathan strongly believed that “all young people have the potential to survive adversity”. He also drew attention to the importance of kindness, noting that many individuals had unexpectedly helped him throughout his life, “without the question of race, religion or age”. He hoped that young people would similarly understand their duty to lend a helping hand to others.

Another participant recounted that in the 1974 *Laju* Incident, Mr Nathan had put his life on the line when he negotiated with Japanese terrorists and offered himself in exchange for their hostages on the *Laju* ferry. Mr Nathan was asked how a similar spirit of “self-sacrifice” among younger Singaporeans could be nurtured amidst a culture that had become very self-centred. Referring to the title of his first book, *Why Am I Here?*, Mr Nathan said that a priest had posed him this question when he had been on the verge of leaving his post as a Seamen’s Welfare Officer in the late 1950s, full of despair at the challenges faced on the job. Yet, he was reminded of the larger interests of people he served in his job and the consequences of abandonment – a reminder that would come back to him each time he faced a dilemma later in life. “If you know your duty, there is no choice but to do something, however risky or unpleasant, for the larger interest,” he said. He encouraged younger Singaporeans to look beyond their own interests sometimes, and “ask why [you] are here”.

Younger Singaporeans could often be critical of Singapore’s leaders and their policies, but he encouraged them to consider this: “We all have obligations to our country, with all its faults,” he said. “A moral compass” was important in guiding any kind of criticism against the state, “because a spoken word cannot be unspoken,” he said, emphasising the importance of responsible criticism.

As a largely self-taught young man who only completed his secondary education via a correspondence course whilst working after World War II, Mr Nathan said that he never dreamed of being able to afford a university education. He remained grateful to friends who were adamant that he continue his education and confident that he would be able to obtain funding for his studies. His time in university was valuable because it taught him not just



Mr Nathan spoke to IPS Corporate Associates on the highlights and challenges faced over the course of his many years in the Singapore Public Service, at a dialogue moderated by IPS Director Mr Janadas Devan.

“what to learn, but how to learn”, and the value of lifelong learning. “Young people must see in every day that there is something to learn and look forward to,” he added, “sometimes we may be given a lousy hand, early, midway or late in life. Don’t give up on it.”

Reflections on Singapore’s Leadership

Reflecting on the challenges of leadership, Mr Nathan paid tribute to the fortitude of Singapore’s founding leaders, whom he had worked with during his early years in the civil service. He recounted that the challenges Singapore faced in its early years of independence were immense, with new problems emerging at every minute, yet he and many others who had to tackle such issues in the civil service were mere “rookies” at the time. These early experiences gave him the opportunity to learn about the complexity of issues Singapore faced with regard to its economy, security and diplomatic relations. In particular, he had been very impressed with how Singapore’s founding leaders had navigated diplomatic predicaments in Singapore’s early years. They had been faced with frequent and unpredictable challenges, and had to persuade others from abroad to invest in Singapore when it seemed to be just an island with nothing to offer. “Mind you, we all started from scratch,” he said, reminding Singaporeans that most of its founding leaders had no formal diplomatic training and had to learn on the job. Instead, they read widely and learned from the advice and experience of leaders they met, building up a body of knowledge about diplomacy and about how to profile Singapore in a turbulent world. Despite their lack of experience in national leadership, they managed to establish Singapore’s “brand name”. Singapore’s reputation of success was a “precious thing”, said Mr Nathan, considering how it must inevitably be handed over to a new generation of younger Singaporeans: “All I ask is, don’t destroy it.”

Role of the Presidency

A participant noted that the most recent presidential election in August 2011 had witnessed a vigorous contest among four candidates, and asked if Mr Nathan felt that certain roles of the presidential office had been misunderstood by the public. Mr Nathan said it was important to keep in mind that the constitutional role of the president was not an executive one, except in regard to approving the use of past reserves. However, while he was not a part of the government, Mr Nathan said this did not preclude him from privately voicing his concerns to the Cabinet on issues he did not agree with. Within the privacy of such meetings, Cabinet members would either consider his concerns, or provide explanations for their decisions, which were sometimes based on information the president was not privy to earlier. There were also constitutional constraints on the ability of the president to grant presidential pardons for death row prisoners. As president, Mr Nathan said he was obliged to take the advice of the Cabinet, despite his own personal moral leanings. “The presidency is not there to check the government”, he said, but in the case of extreme disagreements between the president and the government concerning the interests of the nation that could not be resolved in the privacy of their meetings, it would be necessary for the president to come out publicly with his disagreement and accept any controversy that would emerge in parliament. Members of parliament would then have to decide whether or not to overrule the president. Such were the provisions laid out in the Constitution, he said.



Mr Nathan autographed copies of his memoirs, *An Unexpected Journey: Path to the Presidency*

The lunch dialogue session came to an end with Mr Nathan autographing copies of his recently published personal memoirs, *An Unexpected Journey: Path to the Presidency*, which traces his extraordinary life journey from humble beginnings to sixth President of Singapore, and personal insight into the events and personalities integral to the development of Singapore in the early years of its independence.

Speaker's Profile

S R Nathan received his early education in several schools – Anglo-Chinese Primary and Middle School, Rangoon Road Afternoon School and Victoria School.

Mr Nathan started working before completing his studies. After the war, whilst working, he completed his secondary education through self-study and entered the University of Malaya (then in Singapore) where he graduated in 1954 with a Diploma in Social Studies (Distinction).

Mr Nathan began his career in the Singapore Civil Service as a medical social worker in 1955. He was appointed Seamen's Welfare Officer the following year. In 1962, he was seconded to the Labour Research Unit of the Labour Movement, first as Assistant Director and later Director of the Labour Research Unit until January 1966. He continued as a Member of its Board of Trustees until April 1988.

In February 1966, he was transferred to the Foreign Ministry. He served as Assistant Secretary and rose to be Deputy Secretary before being appointed Acting Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Home Affairs in January 1971. In August of the same year, Mr Nathan moved to the Ministry of Defence where he was a Director with the rank of Permanent Secretary.

In February 1979, he returned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and became its First Permanent Secretary until February 1982 when he left to become the Executive Chairman of the Straits Times Press (1975) Ltd, the Singapore newspaper company. At various times from 1982 to 1988, Mr Nathan also held directorship of several other companies including the Singapore Mint Pte Ltd. The Straits Times Press (London) Ltd, Singapore Press Holdings Ltd and Marshall Cavendish Ltd. He was Chairman of Mitsubishi Singapore Heavy Industries – a Ship-repairing and Engineering joint-venture with the Mitsubishi Group of Japan, from 1973 to 1986.

From 1983 to April 1988, Mr Nathan was Chairman of the Hindu Endowments Board. He was a founding member of SINDA – the Singapore Indian Development Association – and its Term Trustee until August 1999.

In April 1988, Mr Nathan was appointed Singapore's High Commissioner to Malaysia and in July 1990, became Ambassador to the United States of America where he served until June 1996. On his return, Mr Nathan was made Ambassador-at-Large and was concurrently Director of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies at the Nanyang Technological University. He held a directorship in the Singapore International Media Pte Ltd between September 1996 and August 1999.

He resigned as Ambassador-at-Large and Director of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies on 17 August 1999 and was elected President of the Republic of Singapore on 18 August 1999. He began his 6-year term from 1 September 1999. On 17 August 2005, Mr Nathan was re-elected and he was sworn-in for his second term of office on 1 September 2005.

Mr Nathan was conferred the Public Service Star in 1964, the Public Administration Medal (Silver) in 1967, and the Meritorious Service Medal in 1974.



Mr Nathan with members of the IPS administrative team, at the conclusion of his dialogue with IPS Corporate Associates

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