

Contain Singapore's rich, institutionalise dissent: Donald Low

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Singapore's brand of meritocracy needs to be reformed, and the government needs to create legitimate space for alternative voices, says economist and public policy expert Donald Low.

Speaking at the second session of the Singapore Perspectives 2013 conference on governance on Monday afternoon, Low, a senior fellow and assistant dean at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, pointed out that the Singapore government's once-admired "pristine policy lab" that churned out solutions in healthcare, housing, education and transport is no longer garnering complete trust from its people.

"The pristine 'policy lab' that our policymakers used to operate in is being replaced by a more critical public, and by a more diverse polity with competing interests," he said. "Increasingly, our policymakers have to make hard choices, not just remind themselves of hard truths, (and) sustaining good governance in this new context is not impossible, but it would require significant institutional and policy reforms on the part of the government."

Reforming Singapore's style of meritocracy

Speaking shortly after Acting Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Lawrence Wong, who maintained the importance of meritocracy in Singapore, Low stressed first the need for some form of control over those who succeed in our country's system.

"There is no *prima facie* reason to believe that those who have succeeded will channel their energies to improve society's well-being," he said.

Relating the example of Wall Street bankers using bailout money to pay themselves million-dollar bonuses, Low, who is also the vice president of the Economic Society of Singapore, cautioned against the establishment of a sense of self-entitlement among people who benefit from meritocracy and who believe completely in it.

"This kind of meritocracy breeds a belief among its beneficiaries that they are entitled to their rewards, that the market system is inherently just, and that inequality is natural," he said. "They view those who have not succeeded in the system as slothful or lacking in merit — and thus undeserving of state support. Such a system increases resistance by the rich to the redistributive policies needed to address inequality."

Low also argued that despite Singaporeans constantly being warned of the risks of a welfare state, the risks of moral hazard are significantly greater when the rich are not properly regulated.

"Corporate malfeasance imposes much larger costs on society than the so-called entitlement mentality of the poor addicted to government welfare," he said.

How should Singapore emphasise fairness and social justice to prevent the abuse of its meritocratic system? Avoid conflicts of interest, ensure the independence of public institutions, and increase transparency and public accountability, Low asserted.

“It also means strengthening our social safety nets and other redistributive institutions, and ensuring a fairer allocation of risks between state and citizens,” he added.

Institutionalising dissent

In his remarks, Low also called on the government to be open to a greater diversity of ideas, advocating a system of “distributed intelligence” instead of relying on a small group of leaders.

“In the long run, we are better off relying on a system of distributed intelligence, on Singapore having a diversity of ideas and competing options, than on a system that is critically dependent on a similar group of people, no matter how bright they might be,” he said.

Making this happen, he added, would involve the government increasing citizen and researcher access to information, and giving added support to research in social science to equal its investment into hard sciences — a move that will enhance trust in the system of governance as well as its credibility.

Low also moved to debunk the concern expressed by ruling party leaders that increasing room for alternative, dissenting voices might paralyse the government.

“I’m more worried about how the desire for control, harmony and stability might weaken the already weak incentives for policymakers to allow competing ideas to surface, and to subject these to serious debate and analysis,” he said. “In short, I’m less worried about the risks of polarisation than I am about the effects of incumbency, the inertia of the status quo, and the tyranny of old ideas.”