

## 2016/17 IPS-Nathan Lectures The Challenges of Governance in a Complex World

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FROM April to May 2017, the Institute of Policy Studies held the 2016/17 IPS-Nathan Lectures by Mr Peter Ho. The series was collectively titled *The Challenges of Governing in a Complex World*. Mr Ho delivered four lectures discussing the issues of complexity, governance, and futures thinking, drawing on his experience as Senior Adviser at the Centre for Strategic Futures, and former Head of Civil Service (2005 – 2010).

To extend our reach, IPS [live streamed two of the lectures on Facebook](#) – a first for IPS events. The streams received around 1,000 views each time and proved to be interactive, with viewers posing their questions online during the Question-and-Answer sessions, and Mr Ho taking them on.



An average of 300 people attended each lecture, which were [widely covered in the press](#). In particular, Mr Ho's remarks on the need to take risks and the role of civil servants in Singapore's future attracted interest.

Teo Xian Min, Assistant Director at the Ministry of National Development, said after Mr Ho's first lecture, "I think I'll definitely share (about the lecture) with my colleagues, because in our daily work, we deal with immediate problems, but we also have to think long-term, so coming from a practitioner's perspective – the former Head of Civil Service – will really help us grapple with this balance."

Before start of series, [Mr Ho said that he had three lessons he wanted to offer the audience through his lectures](#): i) that our environment is a fast-changing and complex one, ii) that there are no easy answers, and iii) that every major decision and policy is an exercise in making the right judgment, rather than finding the absolute right answer. Mr Ho made good on his aims by introducing new concepts throughout the lectures, delving further into them as the series progressed to explicate the complexity of the world we live in today.

"The past, they say, is another country, but I think Peter has succeeded in making the future, at least, a country that we would like to visit," said IPS Director Janadas Devan in his closing remarks to the series.

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### [Lecture I – Hunting Black Swans and Taming Black Elephants: Governance in a Complex World \(5 April 2017\)](#)

**Moderated by Ms Debra Soon, Chief Customer Officer & Head, English Audience Segment, Mediacorp Pte Ltd**

In the opening lecture, Mr Ho took the opportunity to provide a framework for his series. He started by explaining what complex systems were, and how it affected governance today. As there were many connections and interactions among agents in a complex system, outcomes tend to be unpredictable, leaving policy makers and planners surprised.

Mr Ho also introduced several concepts to elucidate complexity, such as *the butterfly effect*, whereby small changes in initial conditions can produce large effects, and the *black elephant*, which is a problem that people pretend not to see, even though it is visible to them. The question-and-answer segment centered on two themes: the role of non-government actors in managing complexity, and how to prepare people for a complex future.

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### [Lecture II – Governing in the Anthropocene: Risk & Resilience, Imagination & Innovation \(19 April 2017\)](#)

**Moderated by Professor Chan Heng Chee, Chairman, Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities, Singapore University of Technology and Design**

Moving on from the conceptual focus of the first lecture, Mr Ho examined two of the foremost challenges that he felt governments will face in a world that is increasingly VUCA – Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous. Firstly, governments have to deal with inevitable disruptions as the world becomes increasingly connected. Secondly, they need to manage the impact of risk on national objectives and policies.



*Professor Chan Heng Chee (centre, with purple scarf), who moderated Lecture II, also celebrated her birthday on the same day.*

The example of the Singapore government’s response to SARS was raised as a case study of national-level resilience in the face of disruption. Audience members posed questions ranging from the exacerbation of social inequalities due to technological disruption to the types of risks the Singapore government should prepare for.

**Lecture III – The Paradox of Singapore and the Dialectic of Governance (3 May 2017)**

**Moderated by Mr Chng Kai Fong, Principal Private Secretary to the Prime Minister, Prime Minister’s Office**

The third lecture by Mr Ho took on a more localised focus. Mr Ho started out the lecture by drawing out the conditions that led to Singapore’s independence. He pointed out that the challenges for Singapore is that our successes in overcoming our unfavourable conditions have masked the deep challenges that remain – what he described as “the paradox of Singapore”

The remainder of the lecture focused on several dialectics – two opposing perspectives towards an issue, such as “Order versus Disorder”, and “Paralysis by Analysis versus Acts of Faith”- to examine how Singapore can survive in an era of increasing complexity. Questions raised included the kind of culture Singapore needs to catalyse risk-taking, and what reason Singapore has to be hopeful for its future.



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**[Lecture IV – The Future: Governance, Unintended Consequences, and the Redemption of Hope \(17 May 2017\)](#)**

**Moderated by Ms Chua Mui Hoong, Opinion Editor, The Straits Times**

Having come full circle, the concluding lecture focused on the way forward for Singapore's future. Mr Ho presented several possible futures for Singapore, including extending the idea of Singapore beyond our borders as a charter city, and embracing virtual reality. Singapore has reason to be optimistic in an era of increasing complexity, said Mr Ho, as its small size means it is able to experiment easily, and because of its past experience dealing with uncertainty at Independence.

Tying the threads of all his lectures together, Mr Ho expressed that the series was meant to inspire hope that small city-states can influence and shape their operating environment. Mr Ho concluded his series with a quote by Rumi, the 13<sup>th</sup> Century Persian Mystic: "The garden of the world has no limits, except in your mind."

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The lectures and question-and-answer segments are being compiled into a book, which will be published within a year. The video of each lecture has been uploaded on [IPS' YouTube Page](#) and the [speeches are available on our website](#),

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