



**Do our cultural leaders “get” the arts?
Report on the IPS-SAM Spotlight on Cultural Policy Series:
Roundtable on The Future of Cultural Leadership in Singapore**

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CULTURAL LEADERSHIP refers both to the leadership of government and quasi-government agencies that formulate and implement policies promoting the arts and culture, and the leadership of institutions that create, promote, and showcase the arts and culture. They include the Minister for Culture, Minister for Education, senior management and board members of the National Arts Council, the National Heritage Board, and cultural institutions such as National Gallery Singapore and the Esplanade. Cultural leaders face similar challenges as leaders in other domains, but also unique ones arising from the nature of the arts. Specifically, the arts are creative and open-ended, involve risk-taking, are difficult to evaluate in terms of success, and are closely tied to larger political, societal and philosophical issues.

On 27 October 2017, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) organised a roundtable discussion at the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) that brought together 60 participants comprising policymakers, academics, artists and arts practitioners, and management and board members of arts groups to discuss the kind of cultural leadership that Singapore needs. The roundtable was chaired by Mr Tan Tarn How, Adjunct Senior Research Fellow at IPS.

The key questions included: Who should lead the major cultural institutions of a country? What values should they be driven by? Is there sufficient capability development for our cultural leaders? What are the issues of cultural leadership specific to Singapore in its current state of political, societal, and artistic development?

Cultural leadership as navigation

In her opening remarks, Dr June Yap, Director of Curatorial, Programmes and Publications at the Singapore Art Museum, likened cultural leadership to “navigation” by sailors. For effective navigation, they have to use the “guiding light” provided by constellations in going ahead and also understand the “vessel” they are steering. Successful cultural leadership not only requires knowledge, skill, logic, an understanding of context, but also the ability to have foresight and vision.



The roundtable held on 27 October 2017 on cultural leadership is the fourth part of a wider series, the [IPS-SAM Spotlight on Cultural Policy Series](#).

Cultural leadership landscape

The three presenters were Mr Baey Yam Keng, Parliamentary Secretary for the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth; Mr Arun Mahizhnan, Special Research Adviser at the Institute of Policy Studies; and Mr Thirunalan Sasitharan, Co-Founder and Director of the Intercultural Theatre Institute.

Mr Baey spoke about his ministry's programmes to promote the arts and culture. They include museum-based learning for Primary School students, the Cultural Matching Fund, and greater access to the arts and culture for the less fortunate. The ministry also has initiatives to upskill cultural leaders, ranging from job rotation, training at the Culture Academy, to the Creative Industries Workforce Skills Qualifications Framework. An effective cultural leader must have a good understanding of both the arts and culture, and administration; social acumen to know the ground sentiment; and an ambition to try new things.

A “dual-track” system for cultural leaders

Mr Arun pointed out that the current government system was unable to foster strong cultural leadership. The system assumed that “generalist” administrative officers on frequent rotational assignments — with little or no domain knowledge when first appointed to their senior posts — would eventually gain the necessary expertise over time. However, governing Singapore

has become highly complex and requires “specialists” with specific domain knowledge. Mr Arun proposed having a new “dual-track” system where “generalists” and “specialists” advance with equal rank and rewards. The government must gain more cultural literacy and artistic sensibilities to make informed decisions about arts and cultural policies. However, he also reminded the arts community not to expect the government to behave like artists, and to recognise their own need to have administrative sensibilities as well.



(L—R) Speakers Mr Thirunalan Sasitharan, Mr Arun Mahizhnan, Mr Baey Yam Keng, and Mr Tan Tarn How, who moderated the discussion.

The tension between cultural leaders and artists

Mr Sasitharan spoke about the unavoidable tension between cultural leaders in the public service and artists on the ground. This is because good bureaucrats are trained to objectify culture as they would any other public good. For artists, however, culture is deeply intertwined with their sense of who they are. This difference often translates into bureaucrats “not getting the arts”. As a result, they fail to understand the instincts, impulses and needs of the arts community on the ground. Effective cultural leadership needs to engage artists on their own terms, be open to embracing differences and new diversities in expression, and be prepared to risk the possibility of failure.

Discussion

The main points raised in the discussion were:

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1. **The need to address the tension between policymakers and artists.** Cultural leaders in the government have the responsibility to grasp the spirit of the arts, and understand the difference between “policy-ing the arts” and “policing the arts”. Conversely, artists need to possess greater administrative sensibilities to better understand challenges faced by bureaucrats on contentious issues such as funding. One possible way to achieve this is to establish a “buddy system” in the administration where “generalist administrators” are paired with “specialist administrators” in order to facilitate the exchange of perspectives.
2. **Policymakers have a responsibility to protect the “safe space” in which art is produced.** In a time where conservatism is on a global rise, the ability of the arts to address issues in an accessible manner and create platforms for discussion and better understanding is more important than ever. Thus, cultural leaders in government need to protect this “safe space” in which artists operate. Nevertheless, different people might have different ideas of the kind of arts that should exist within this space. Hence, cultural leaders in the government also need to come forth to defend artworks that a vocal minority finds offensive and tries to censor. Both cultural leaders and artists need to think about how to pursue contentious issues and controversial topics in a manner that would bring different segments of society together.

A full report of the roundtable discussion titled “Do our cultural leaders ‘get’ the arts?” can be downloaded [here](#). More details about the event can also be found [here](#).

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