

Singapore Perspectives 2017: What If?

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The full report of Singapore Perspectives 2017 is available [here](#).

Midway during this year's Singapore Perspectives (SP) conference, the audience was told that it was time for a surprise. And several minutes later, as IPS Director Janadas Devan invited IPS Special Adviser Tommy Koh and others associated with the Institute on stage, a birthday cake was brought out, and the sounds of "Happy Birthday" filled the conference ballroom.

Professor Koh turns 80 later this year and the Institute thought to celebrate him at its annual flagship conference held on 23 January 2017. In his tribute to Professor Koh, who was IPS' Director from 1990 to 1997 and 2000 to 2004, Mr Devan noted that "Tommy has worn many hats — National Arts Council, National Heritage Board, The Esplanade — but for selfish reasons, I would like to think that the most colourful hat he has worn is IPS."

"All the other [IPS] directors — we're just temporary custodians of the house that Tommy built," he said to the 950-strong audience comprising senior civil servants, business leaders, members of civic and community groups, educators and students.



L–R: IPS Special Research Adviser Arun Mahizhnan; IPS Academic Panel member Dr Teh Kok Peng; Chairman of the LKYSPP Governing Board Professor Wang Gungwu; Professor Tommy Koh; Executive Deputy Chairman of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies Ong Keng Yong; IPS Academic Panel member Lee Tzu Yang; and Janadas Devan

Watch the [video of the special celebration for Professor Tommy Koh](#)

The theme of SP2017 was “What If?” and the 11 speakers were asked to reflect on how Singapore’s key governing institutions, systems and values might and should change over the next 50 years.

Mr Devan [opened the conference](#) by laying out the immutable facts of Singapore’s existence. It is in a region that is religiously, culturally, ethnically and politically diverse, with emerging new diversities that all societies are dealing with. Singapore itself is a country as well as a city, and this fact informs every facet of its existence, from the location of its gateways to it being the only city in the world with a foreign service and a military. The challenge for the future then is maintaining exceptional governance — where there is sustained, long-term planning and action — even as our people become more diverse and our politics more contested.



The four panel sessions that followed discussed their own set of “What If” questions, with Panel IV, featuring Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills) Ong Ye Kung and Executive Chairman of Banyan Tree Holdings Limited Ho Kwon Ping responding to the question, “What if Singapore becomes a two or multi-party system?” This panel was the most popular with the audience; of the 379 people who turned in their feedback forms, more than 80 per cent said they found Panel IV “excellent”.

Participants also enjoyed the diversity of speakers. The two panels in the morning featured voices of different generations, with Panel II made up of individuals in their 20s and 30s. In the words of a conference participant, it was a “good initiative to invite a young panel; it gives a sense of how the millennials think.” Panel II speaker Amanda Chong’s impassioned speech and subsequent exchange with Professor Tommy Koh was dubbed [“a tender exchange”](#) by news website [Mothership.sg](#). Overall, the audience felt that the conference

concept was well executed, although several people gave written feedback suggesting that speakers could have been less “politically correct”.

Panel I: Looking Out

Chairperson	Professor Tommy Koh Special Adviser IPS		
Speakers	What if the nation-state is no longer the key organising unit of the world?	What if globalisation fails?	What if Singapore has to choose between China and the United States?
	Professor Wang Gungwu Chairman Governing Board LKYSPP	Dr Khong Cho-Oon Chief Political Analyst Global Business Environment Shell International	Professor Joseph Liow Dean and Professor of Comparative and International Politics RSIS, NTU

This panel considered the possibilities if the key prevailing assumptions about the external environment, which have guided Singapore’s approach to public policy, are no longer valid. Prof. Wang was quick to point out that the nation-state is a relatively new concept, and is in fact a work-in-progress. Dr Khong expressed the sentiment that globalisation would not fail, but rather evolve into a different form. Prof. Liow stressed that any choice should be made based on Singapore’s own interests, rather than the preferences of other states.

Two themes emerged in the discussion: the future of globalisation and its relationship with the “angry voter”, and the role of supranational bodies. The session concluded on the question of whether the US would withdraw its engagement with East Asia.

Watch the [full discussion of Panel I](#)

Panel II: Looking In

Chairperson	Ms Li Xueying Deputy News Editor <i>The Straits Times</i> Singapore Press Holdings Ltd		
Speakers	What if non-economic indicators become the measure of a country’s progress?	What if Singapore fails to become a creative and innovative nation?	What if Singapore fails to sustain itself as a vibrant, cosmopolitan “global city”?
	Mr Jeremy Au Social Entrepreneur	Mr Aaron Maniam Civil Servant and Poet	Ms Amanda Chong Lawyer and Poet

Panel II considered how Singapore can balance the priorities that we can and should have as a nation in 2065, and how we may want to assess our progress and success. Mr Au suggested turning to our National Pledge as a source of holistic values that Singaporeans could aspire to. Mr Maniam examined the role of metaphors for better creativity in Singapore, such as “biology” to capture the dynamism in creativity. Ms Chong argued that Singapore was in danger of “closing the door on itself” if it continued developing the arts for the sake of attracting global talent. The themes that emerged in the question-and-answer session include the issue of establishing priorities for Singapore, reaching consensus on those priorities, and better engaging marginalised groups in that process.



Watch the [full discussion of Panel II](#).

Panel III: Looking Across

Chairperson	Dr Gillian Koh Deputy Director (Research) IPS		
Speakers	What if we ignore race and religion?	What if we cease to accept immigrants?	What if the family is no longer the fundamental building block of society?
	Dr Norman Vasu Senior Fellow and Deputy Head Centre of Excellence for National Security RSIS, NTU	Ms Mariam Jaafar Partner and Managing Director The Boston Consulting Group	Associate Professor Thang Leng Leng Deputy Director Centre for Family and

Population Research
FASS, NUS

This panel reflected on the core values that have shaped our society and the way we deal with social diversity.

Dr Vasu described the current policy paradigm on race and religion as “hard multiculturalism”, with the express aim of protecting minority rights, preserving culture and providing opportunities for social cohesion. Ms Jaafar opined that immigrants can do their part to improve the level of integration into Singapore society instead of relying on top-down guidance. A/P Thang argued that while the family unit may be changing, it may not necessarily be for the worse. The discussion centred on the issues of immigration, race and religion, and family.

Watch the [full discussion of Panel III](#)

Panel IV: Looking Ahead

Chairperson Ms Debra Soon
Chief Customer Officer
MediaCorp Pte Ltd

Speakers **What if Singapore becomes a two or multi-party system?**

Mr Ong Ye Kung
Minister for Education
(Higher Education and Skills)

Mr Ho Kwon Ping
Executive Chairman
Banyan Tree Holdings Limited



Panel IV looked at the central question of governance and the way in which public policy decisions are made. Minister Ong expressed his confidence in Singaporeans' ability to adapt to a two-party system, should it happen. In Mr Ho's remarks, he warned against complacency taking root in the ruling party. The danger of a single-party dominant system was that the environment could encourage nepotism, complacency and corruption, he said. One of the recurring themes in the discussion was the longevity of the PAP as the ruling party.

Watch the [full discussion of Panel IV](#)

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