

The Fundamentals of a Strong Singaporean Society
17th GP Seminar
Ministry of Education
River Valley High School, Auditorium
25th March 2009

At the invitation of the Ministry of Education, Dr Gillian Koh, Senior Research Fellow at IPS addressed more than 200 General Paper teachers on 25 March 2009 at their 17th GP Seminar. One of three speakers, she addressed the topic, 'The Role of Government' in ensuring that our society remained 'strong', resilient, cohesive in the midst of the current economic downturn.

Dr Koh began her presentation with a quick review of the extent and impact of the economic recession. The fall in exports since the end of 2008 and the accompanying rise in unemployment had led the government to reinforce some of the existing social safety nets and introduce new measures to help people cope with the dislocation. Was this enough to ensure that Singaporean society remained 'strong'? Would more be needed? What did citizens expect of the government?

Recognising that the audience would be all too familiar with 'The Singapore Story', she talked through briefly how Singapore was a developmentalist state where the government took the lead in deciding and effectively implementing strategies for human resource development, industrial development, and social development in providing for citizens' basic needs of housing, healthcare, education and transportation. The role of the Economic Development Board epitomised this for how it was integral in bringing about the progress we now enjoyed. However, it was also important to note that by the late 1990s, there was a strong impetus to take stock and re-vision economic development plans. This resulted in, among other things, the re-orientation of the economy and a re-tooling of workers.

Even with buoyant growth of the from 2003, the government also recognised that there would be 'winners' and 'losers' and the problem of a widening income gap that had to be addressed to ensure maximum social mobility and minimum disruption to Singapore's social cohesion and political stability. Initiatives like the Workfare Income Supplement Scheme were the result of that concern. These were transfer payments that were linked to work and in-line with many of the key principles of governance established by the People's Action Party government – 'work for reward, reward for work' in this case. The latest set of income distribution figures from Department of

Statistics suggested that the slew of efforts had helped to ameliorate the threat of a widening divide. Yet, the idea of direct transfer payments was a new direction taken by the government to develop a more complex system of social safety nets.

With the downturn, demands on governance and government could only become more complex. Governments elsewhere are re-thinking their governance models. In Singapore, there would be a greater call on the many helping hands in the people sector to meet the needs of people who faced dislocation. However, by inviting greater responsibility, those involved from the people sector or civil society would also expect to be given more opportunity to have a say and engage the government on related policy issues. While the Singapore government was typically rated highly for its efficiency, integrity, regulation quality, and how it upholds the rule of law (say in the World Bank Governance Indicators), it was rated less well in the area of 'voice and accountability'. This would certainly be an area where the government will take steps to improve upon in facing the current challenges to a strong Singaporean society.

The event ended with a question and answer session with the three speakers.

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