

**'The Heart and the Politics of Active Citizenship in Singapore' by Dr Gillian Koh
Panel Discussion on Active Citizenry,
Moot Parliament Programme, Gifted Education Branch, Ministry of Education
Anglo-Chinese School (Independent) Auditorium
13 February 2009**

The concept of active citizenship was discussed by IPS Senior Research Fellow Dr Gillian Koh at the kick-off session of the 'Moot Parliament Programme', a mentorship programme organised by the Gifted Education Branch of the Ministry of Education. The audience comprised students in the Integrated Programme of various schools.

Dr Koh started her talk at the fundamental level of what it meant to be a citizen and the different concepts there were depending on the ideological lenses one adopted - liberalism, republicanism, socialism and communitarianism. At the heart of it, the concept of 'active citizenship' was the sense that a citizen who had membership and rights within a community also had a moral responsibility to contribute voluntarily and actively to the betterment of that community. The concept could be stretched to include the idea of 'guilt by omission' where one might see it as his basic responsibility to 'right a wrong' proactively, and also by the idea of campaigning and mobilising to achieve common good in the online world.

The students were given many examples of active citizenship - citizen-led advocacy towards government and fellow citizens through past decades in Singapore, from nature and heritage conservation, to wheelchair accessibility of public areas, to online petitions on casinos and compensation on Lehman mini-bonds. The students were challenged to start making a difference at their local level and in their everyday lives through simple acts like giving up seats to the elderly and infirmed on MRT trains.

The lively session was chaired by Mr Choo Zheng Xi, editor of The Online Citizen. There were two other speakers. One of them was Mr Farid Abdul Hamid, Consultant and Principal Trainer of consultancy firm, Ithaca who talked about his work in trying to foster greater cross-cultural understanding in Singapore through experiential courses on race and religion. The other was Mr Louis Ng, Executive Director of animal rights advocacy group Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (ACRES) who shared his personal story of how wildlife conservation became his passion. He highlighted how ACRES sought to engage citizens in dealing with the real and immediate needs of animals around us and urged the students to do their part in fostering a humane society in Singapore.

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