

How “We” Will Fare in the Future – Singapore Perspectives 2016 Conference

The Institute of Policy Studies’ (IPS) flagship Singapore Perspectives (SP) conference took place on Monday, 18 January 2016. Around 900 people — including public servants, business leaders, young professionals, academics, community and civil society leaders and students — attended the full-day event.

This year’s theme was “We” — the collective noun with which our national pledge begins and which summons into existence our shared identity as Singaporeans.

As IPS Director Janadas Devan put it in his [opening remarks](#), the conference, organised by IPS researchers Teng Siao See and Justin Lee, aimed to imagine the future of “We”. IPS chose to experiment with a new conference format to ensure we can have “a conversation about ourselves”, he said.

(Watch the video of Janadas Devan’s opening remarks [here](#))



To helm the [panel discussions](#), the Institute invited four Ministers who are likely to make up the core of the PAP government’s fourth-generation leadership team. Each discussion lasted for one-and-a-half hours, and featured three panellists, selected from Singapore’s most distinguished academics, public intellectuals, business and community leaders.

No papers were presented; each Minister opened their session with a 15-minute speech. Panellists subsequently responded to what the Minister said and posed questions on the future of Singapore’s politics, economy and society. Between 30 and 45 minutes of each session was devoted to dialogue with the audience.

One-third of participants gave IPS their feedback on the conference. Of these, 69% said the conference met their expectations while 93% gave the conference an overall rating of “Excellent” or “Good”. On average, at least seven in 10 participants described each conference session as either “Excellent” or “Good”, when they were asked for their overall assessment of the four panels. IPS also received pointers for improvement — ranging from allowing audience members to submit questions online, to improving the stage setting and introducing breakout sessions for participants to discuss issues raised at the conference among themselves.

The conference was well-covered by [print and broadcast media](#), and videos of the conference are available on [IPS’ YouTube](#) channel. Channel NewsAsia will run a one-hour special on the conference on Friday 22 January at 8pm; Saturday 23 January at 1am; Saturday 23 January at 6pm; and Monday 25 January at 1pm. Full reports on each conference session will be published on IPS Commons in the coming weeks. Photos of the conference are available on [IPS’ Flickr page](#).

In closing SP2016, Mr Devan said that the SP conference has become “something of an institution, and a major annual gathering” where Singaporeans can discuss issues of national interest and concern. IPS takes its responsibility seriously and always endeavours to put together the best programme to deserve the support of conference participants and sponsors, he said.

If you have any feedback on SP2016 or suggestions for SP2017, please e-mail ips.publicaffairs@nus.edu.sg

Panel I: Collaborative Governance?



Speaker:

Mr Chan Chun Sing, Secretary-General, National Trades Union Congress (NTUC)

Chairperson:

Mr Warren Fernandez, Editor, *The Straits Times*

Panellists:

Ms Lee Huay Leng, Editor, *Lianhe Wanbao*

Associate Professor Eugene Tan, School of Law, Singapore Management University (SMU)

Mr Kok Heng Leun, Artistic Director, Drama Box Ltd

Summary:

This panel discussion sought to examine the state of collaborative governance in Singapore and if it was possible to have a greater plurality of voices in policy discussion and formulation.

Good governance is about improving the lives and livelihoods of people, and has so far given Singapore a “competitive advantage”, said Mr Chan, who is also a Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office. He cited tripartism and the work of inter-religious organisations as positive examples of collaborative governance, which required parties involved to have shared goals, to take collective responsibility and action, and to have trust and humility,

among other things. Collaborative governance should not degenerate into sectoral interests attempting to override each other, or a situation where people talked about what they wanted, but left the “execution to someone else”.

Having “chaotic” discussions was not necessarily unproductive but could lead to people understanding one another better, noted Mr Kok. There were already good examples of collaborative governance, said Associate Professor Tan, but these efforts are “very intimately tied to the ruling party”. “How do we prevent Singapore from going through a systemic collapse if the ruling party falls?” he asked.

Participants raised questions on how Singapore can work towards more productive and extensive collaborative governance. Could there be a greater culture of tolerance in the years to come? What about the government being more transparent with data and information, say on the number of people receiving public assistance?

Watch the video [here](#)

Read the media coverage of this panel: [The Straits Times](#); [TODAY](#); [Zaobao](#)

Panel II: Cohesive Diversity?



Speaker:

Mr Ng Chee Meng, Acting Minister for Education (Schools)

Chairperson:

Mr Walter Fernandez, Editor-in-Chief, MediaCorp Pte Ltd

Panellists:

Professor David Chan, Director, Behavioural Sciences Institute, SMU

Associate Professor Elaine Ho, Department of Geography, National University of Singapore (NUS)

Mr Hassan Ahmad, Technical Adviser & Executive Director, Corporate Citizen Foundation

Summary:

This panel discussion surfaced both the existing and emerging diversities in Singapore society, and questioned how Singaporeans could hold fast to its long-held principles of living in peace and harmony. Amidst change and growing differences, how could Singaporeans strengthen their sense of national identity while not excluding non-Singaporeans who live among us?

Mr Ng said that the Singapore pledge [continued to represent the country’s vision for cohesive diversity](#), where people were united regardless of their different ethnicities, religions and backgrounds. Inclusive politics and policies had created “common spaces for all groups to live, work and play together — common spaces that we guard jealously,” he said, and these were not static. They would evolve along with the needs of society.

Panellists pointed to how immigration and inter-marriages had reshaped the cultural make-up of the Singapore population. Thus, new “unifying concepts” were needed, said Professor Chan, with Professor Ho asking if the existing Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO) racial categorisation was impeding integration of new citizens and permanent residents. Were there better ways to represent the changing Singapore demographic beyond the CMIO model?

The existence of Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools, the implication of the CMIO model on integration, and the government’s position on support for single mothers and on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues also came up during the Q&A session.

Watch the video [here](#)

Read the media coverage of this panel: [The Straits Times](#); [TODAY](#); [Zaobao](#)

Panel III: Inclusive Growth



Speaker:

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

Chairperson:

Mr Vikram Khanna, Associate Editor, *The Business Times*

Panellists:

Mr Yeoh Lam Keong, Adjunct Professor, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP), NUS

Dr Chua Hak Bin, Head of ASEAN Economics, Bank of America Merrill Lynch

Professor Tan Kong Yam, Co-Director, Asia Competitiveness Institute, LKYSPP, NUS

Summary:

This session focused on whether inclusiveness and growth could go hand-in-hand, and if so, what exactly it meant and how it could be achieved. Mr Ong too cited the Singapore pledge, saying that inclusive growth meant growth with “justice and equality” that could help society achieve “peace, progress and happiness”. The government had done well on several fronts — for instance, it has kept the tax system light on the average worker, with education, social policies and redistribution seeking to lift those at the bottom. The government was

embarking on new, major initiatives to transform Singapore’s economy, he said, and continued to invest in education and training so that they would be key drivers of progress.

The panellists asked if enough had been done for those who had been left behind, and if more “protectionist” policies had contributed to the impending slowdown, what with job and productivity remaining low. Was there a way to ensure a higher efficiency ratio for the resources pumped into innovation and research? This question was posed by Professor Tan, who cited figures from the Economist Intelligence Unit, which ranked Singapore’s innovation input as high but output as lower than places like Taiwan and Japan.

Participants were keen to learn how policymakers could continue to help SMEs, what role older workers would play in the economy and if it was possible for the younger generation to benefit from growth and social mobility without attaining a degree.

Watch the video [here](#)

Read the media coverage of this panel: [The Straits Times](#); [TODAY](#); [Zaobao](#)

Panel IV: The Future of “We”



Speaker:

Mr Heng Swee Keat, Minister for Finance

Chairperson:

Ms Debra Soon, Head, Family (English) and Premier Segment, MediaCorp TV Pte Ltd

Panellists:

Mr Ho Kwon Ping, Chairman, Board of Trustees, SMU

Ambassador Bilahari Kausikan, 2015/16 S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore, IPS

Ambassador Chan Heng Chee, Chairman, Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities, Singapore University of Technology and Design

Summary:

The topics that came up in this session, the final panel of the conference, reflected some of the trends and aspirations that were likely to define the future of Singapore society. Mr Heng began by highlighting what would and would not change in the Singapore context — for instance, the inherent vulnerabilities resulting from Singapore’s size and geopolitical location would require it to continue being resilient, relevant and resourceful. Yet, increasing globalisation and societal diversity would require new types of kinship to develop within

communities and new common platforms to forge a common understanding of Singapore’s path to the future.

Panellists and participants asked for Mr Heng’s views on a wide range of topics, from how Singapore could respond to trends ranging from interest groups seeking more influence in matters of public interest, to whether the government would be more transparent with data so that civil society groups could access this information. Other questions included: Would there be a re-examination of the ruling PAP government’s political style so that decision-making would be less top-down? Did Mr Heng foresee any change to Section 377A, the law that criminalises homosexual sex, in the next decade, given trends in the West of legalising gay marriage? And how could Singaporeans better understand their history and the country’s vulnerabilities, without viewing these as “propaganda”?

Watch the video [here](#)

Read the media coverage of this panel: [The Straits Times](#); [TODAY](#); [Zaobao](#)

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