

# Keeping the political personal



Prof Kishore Mahbubani, Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, (centre) viewing exhibits as part of the IPS Prism project in 2012.

By *Dr Gillian Koh*

What matters to voters at the polls?

How do citizens and citizen-led civil society groups make their views and interests known to the government effectively, outside of the polls?

When can they share in the process of governance?

What makes Singapore “one united people”?

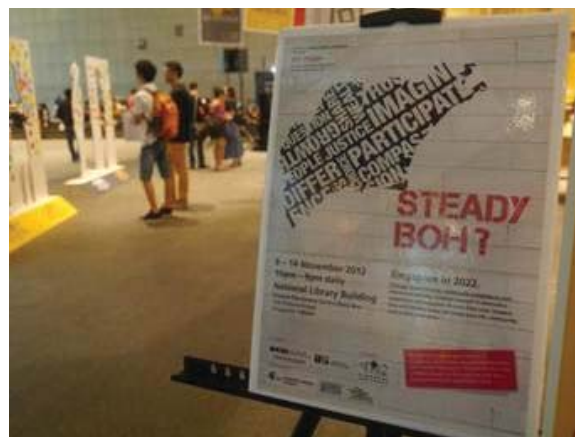
These are questions that animate the Politics and Governance Research Cluster. It conducts quantitative survey-based research on the electoral attitudes of Singaporeans as well as their sense of national identity and pride and social cohesion. It also does qualitative work, analysing broader political trends, state-society relations and processes of public consultation and engagement as practised in Singapore. Finally, it lives what it preaches and often conducts forums that seek to bridge perspectives on areas of public policy across different sectors in Singapore.

The cluster is grateful for the generosity of fellow researchers across the country, civil society activists as well as citizens who have taken the time to support its work in their own special ways.

The project that the cluster is particularly pleased to have presented in 2011-2012 is IPS Prism. This was because the project was conducted using three very new methodologies as far as think-tank work in Singapore is concerned. The cluster is also pleased with it because it was an effort to engage many levels of the public in a critical question at a time when the political landscape seemed to be shifting. That critical question at the heart of IPS Prism was: How will we govern ourselves in 2022?

The first phase of the project involved the use of “scenario-planning” with people closely identified with key sectors of society.

The second method, in the next phase of the project, was the use of an “immersive arts experience” so that the Prism Scenarios of life in 2022 developed in the first phase could be made accessible, engaging and generative to the man-in-the-street. This interactive arts exhibition was held at the National Library Building and even involved presenting forum theatre, where members of the audience got to step into the shoes of the characters and tried out their own solutions to a conundrum that had been designed around the Prism Scenarios. People got to “rehearse the future”, so to speak, and glean learning points for exercising active citizenship.



The third method was to use the method of “narrative capture”, which is to have people who came to the immersive arts experience tell their own story of life in 2022 as well as the significance of their stories. By the method, IPS was able to develop a values map of the respondents. This revealed their views on the role of the state in the provision of Singaporeans’ daily needs, where they thought leadership of the country should come from, and what the vote meant to them. It also revealed how they would ultimately assess a government in terms of whether it had been “effective”. These are findings that are useful for policymakers as well as citizens to take heed of. The conversation about our shared lives on this island continues.

It will do so in another project – the upcoming IPS Conference on Civil Society scheduled to be held on 11 November 2013. Fifteen years after a landmark national conference on the same topic, this 2013 meeting will analyse trends in the development of ground-up civic activism since, and discuss ways in which this precious resource can continue to contribute to social capital and cohesion in the vibrantly diverse, democratic society that is Singapore.



Mr Chan Chun Sing, Minister for Social and Family Development and Second Minister for Defence, (left) sharing his thoughts with Mr Janadas Devan at the IPS Conference on Integration held in May 2012.