

REMARKS BY MR PETER HO
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DPM Teo Chee Hean, my classmate Devan Janadas.

I am very honoured that DPM Teo Chee Hean has joined us this afternoon for this book launch, despite his busy schedule. I am also very grateful for his kind words. He still looks like a navy officer, but not I. He has also outlasted me by several years at the pinnacle of Government, so I hope that one day, he too will find the time to put pen to paper, and write a substantial treatise on the challenges of governance in Singapore, and I think that is the book that should be read. Mine is just holding the place in the interim before that comes out.

The slim volume which is being launched today contains the four lectures that I delivered as S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore, once a fortnight, between 5th April and 17th May 2017.

The basis for these lectures is my conviction that we have entered an era of great change—I describe in one of the lectures the pace of change as having “the lurch of an acceleration, rather than the gentle sensation of a velocity”.

It is a modest effort to address the vital question of what it will take for Singapore to succeed in our VUCA world: Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous. Or if you wish to use a fresh acronym from the OECD, it is a TUNA world: Turbulent, Uncertain, Novel and Ambiguous.

VUCA or TUNA, it is a world of great opportunity but also of enormous risk. Advantage will go to those who are nimble enough to seize opportunity ahead of the pack, while knowing how to manage the risk.

How do we operate and succeed in such a world where change is happening often faster than governments are able to produce well-considered plans and policies?

I believe that good governance is key. It includes the need for strong and wise leadership, an effective civil service that can produce the necessary plans, policies and legislation that take the long-term view.

But while these are necessary, they are not sufficient.

In my lectures, I deployed a menagerie of metaphors—black swans, black elephants, sacred cows, unknown unknowns—to explain the challenges of good governance in a VUCA world. We certainly cannot predict the future. We cannot fully anticipate all scenarios. There are no easy answers and no simple solutions to these challenges.

Because of the complexity of the operating environment, government cannot assume that on its own it has the monopoly of wisdom and the best insights into every problem. Therefore, a new

imperative is emerging, which is greater consultation and dialogue between government and both the private as well as the people sectors. I believe that “Whole-of-Government” and “Whole-of-Nation” will help define good governance in future.

In addition, good governance has to shift towards greater flexibility, and an increased willingness to experiment with new ideas despite the risk of failure. It also means that we will have to learn to manage risk better, and also to develop the resilience to cope with failure—instead of developing a blame culture, evolving a culture of problem-solving.

Fern Yu—my able research assistant from IPS—interviewed me a couple of weeks before the first lecture. She asked me what I hoped the audience would take away from the lectures. This is what I said:

- First, that they will understand that our environment is a fast changing and complex one.
- Second, that it is very easy to criticise from the side, but it is not easy at all to find the right answers.
- Third, that every major decision and every major policy is not an exercise in finding the absolute right answer. Instead, it is always an exercise in making the right judgment – not a hard right or hard wrong - but a balanced one that serves the best interests of the majority and the country.
- Fourth, that judgments have to be revisited now and again – what seems to be sensible now may, in a few years’ time, no longer be as sensible. We have to be prepared to constantly change.
- Fifth, that you cannot make everyone happy.

Despite these caveats, I believe that there is reason to be hopeful and optimistic.

This is because in Singapore we have had fifty years of learning the lessons of good governance. The focus on outcomes, not on ideology, the emphasis on long-term gain, not short-term gratification, the ranking of the greater good of society over the narrow interests of the individual, working together as a team rather than operating within silos, whether they are social, bureaucratic or professional—these attitudes are now embedded in the value system, not just of the government, but of the community and the nation. They constitute an enormous strength, which gives me reason to be optimistic about Singapore’s future, provided that we do not forget the hard-learned and hard-earned lessons of the last fifty years, and provided that we are prepared to embrace change, and act before change is forced upon us.

There were some who wanted me to be more forceful, critical, and even controversial in putting across my points in my lectures.

I chose not to take that route, as I felt that it was more important not just to take a balanced view, but also to explain within a theoretical framework the context of the challenges of government—and of governance. Hence the application of complexity and cognitive science to explain why these challenges arise, and how we can respond. In my time in government, I found that people respond better when they understand the *why*—meaning the reasons—and not just the *how*—meaning just being told that this is the right thing to do.

I hope that the lectures presented some of the challenges and actions of the Singapore government in a fresh light, providing new insights, and demonstrating that in Singapore, we are now at the leading edge of governance.

For me personally, the S R Nathan lectures and the putting them together into a book made for a once-in-a-lifetime experience. I would not do it again, but I learnt a lot in the process, personally. It forced me to review my experiences, and to understand how my thinking evolved over more than three decades of service in government. I did discover some consistency in my thinking, although for a long time I did not have a proper analytical and theoretical framework to back them up.

I would like to thank several people. Once again, DPM Teo for gracing this book launch. Second, all of the donors who have made this Fellowship possible. Third, Devan Janadas for thinking of inviting me and twisting my arm – very hard – to take up the Fellowship. Fourth, IPS – and especially Ariel Tan – for supporting me and my work throughout the Fellowship. Fifth, many friends and colleagues inside and outside government, both in Singapore and overseas, who *consciously* or *unconsciously* helped me with ideas and research. Sixth, Fern Yu, my able and dedicated Research Assistant from IPS. Seventh, World Scientific for publishing this book. Eighth, all of you for taking the trouble to attend this book launch.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge with gratitude the late Mr S R Nathan, after whom this Fellowship is named. The Fellowship provided me with the privilege and the platform to deliver the four lectures, and the unique opportunity to convert them into a book. Mr Nathan inspired and trained generations of public servants like me in the craft of government, and we owe him a debt of gratitude for his legacy in promoting good government—and good governance—in Singapore.

Thank you for joining us this afternoon.

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