

The incalculable value of public service

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No salary, high or low, captures the passion and public spiritedness we hope drives the men and women that serve as our political leaders. Citizens look to them to shape the destiny of the nation in both day-to-day and big policy decisions.

Members of today's Cabinet cannot possibly be driven by their salaries alone to play that role. They indefatigably attend to their policy portfolios juggling the diverse interests of the country, foster international ties to expand our diplomatic and economic interests, and conduct public engagement to understand the ground in the day. At night and on weekends, they deal with community issues, preside over grassroots activities and minister to individual constituents' needs at weekly meet-the-people sessions.

Today's political opposition and some members of the public insinuate that political office holders, past and present, take up their office to 'enrich themselves'. This is handy political rhetoric, but difficult to substantiate. It does whip up public sentiment, especially when, as reality would have it, the nominal median wage level of our citizens in 2010 was \$2,588 according to an October 2011 paper issued jointly by the Ministry of Manpower and Department of Statistics.

This disjunct in the structure of our income distribution provides the background to the political disjunct we face in our national conversation about ministerial salaries. To speak of a basic fixed 13 months' pay for an entry-level minister of \$607,750 or \$46,750 a month recommended by the Ministerial Salaries Committee will still have people's eyes glazing over or getting bloodshot with rage. This income divide is a result of globalisation and is a policy outcome of the ruling People's Action Party's economic policies.

The committee has suggested a 40 per cent discount on private sector salaries - but is it not futile to think of ministerial salaries in that manner? The very notion mixes up market norms (private sector salaries) with social norms (public service).

'When we keep social norms and market norms on their separate paths, life hums along pretty well... when social and market norms collide, trouble sets in,' writes Dan Ariely in *Predictably Irrational*. The behavioural economist cites the idea of paying one's mother-in-law for a well-relished Thanksgiving dinner, or spouse for sex. It will probably be the last time you'll have any more of either.

In the same way, it is unbecoming to discuss public service as a 'discount' on a private sector salary. This is where the social and the market have collided and has been reduced to a bidding war over discounts. The value of the involved, diverse 24/7 jobs that ministers do and their sense of responsibility to the country is diminished in attempting to measure it in dollars and cents.

It can only be a race to the bottom as we have seen in the voluntary welfare sector today - that chief executive officers and their staff must be paid a pittance to demonstrate their sacrifice for charity. Even grant-makers, beneficiaries and well-meaning supporters are reluctant to pay well for the operational costs of such organisations.

Instead of talking about 'discount' or 'sacrifice', the wage of political office-holders should do just one thing - ensure that their families are taken care of such that the question of money does not distract or become a burden. That level will have to be pegged at the basic living conditions of what families of their professional peers have. This is where the idea of an income benchmark applies, but of a much broader swathe of people, say, the average income of the top 10th or 20th percentile of citizen income earners.

Framed in that manner, if this wage is set at a reasonable level, and is reviewed periodically to track existing conditions to keep up with the norms of this broad reference group, the issue of integrity will also be addressed. There would be no excuse for rent-seeking behaviour to pad current lifestyle or to store up deals for the 'after-life'.

The same punitive measures for the prosecution of corruption, the surveillance of the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau and whistle-blowing activism of the public established in our country's early years must become more sophisticated. An independent, transparent way to provide for the declaration and monitoring of interests of office-holders and related persons will be critical if we anticipate that more will enter from the business arena.

Singapore is not short on talent. What talented folks with an altruistic desire to serve the country, with a people-oriented sensibility and strategic-thinking ability, finally do depends on their personal political philosophy, the openness of political parties to embrace them and the extent to which they are daunted by how demanding citizens can get.

Perhaps the current proposal is a half-step to a final solution where we de-link our discussion of what we pay political office-holders from the virtue of their service to improve the lives of fellow citizens and the nation at large. No sum can be fully commensurate with such a job well done, and not a cent should be awarded where there has been a dereliction of that duty.

Setting these salary structures is not a science but must be a result of reasoned debate of the quality of governance we seek to achieve (which is already much vaunted internationally), and the many ways we should find to honour the incalculable value of public service.

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