

Purely personal reflections of an old IPS owl



Mr Arun Mahizhnan with Dr Lee Tsao Yuan, former Director of IPS, at the book launch of the IPS publication *Singapore: Re-engineering Success* in 2002.

By *Arun Mahizhnan*

“Thinking the unthinkable” – I heard this phrase from Herman Kahn, the man who made it famous, in a television interview I helped produce for Radio & Television Singapore in the early 1970s. Kahn, then head of American think tank Hudson Institute, was explaining why think tanks had to think about what others were unable or unwilling to, because it was their job.

To me, a young and innocent producer fresh out of college, even the term “Think Tank” was new, as was the idea of thinking the unthinkable. They had an intellectual sex appeal for me but nothing much came out of the encounter as there was no think tank in Singapore at that time and thinking, in general, was not encouraged outside select circles. I spent a lot of time thinking the thinkable and after 10 years moved on from government service to the corporate sector.

Another decade later, when Professor Tommy Koh became Director of Singapore’s first and only think tank then, I applied to join him. Prof Koh subsequently described my descent into academic poverty from corporate highlife as the result of a midlife crisis and that “instead of taking a mistress, Arun took IPS”. Well, I have to admit that the combined intellectual appeal of a think tank, a Tommy Koh and the opportunity to think some unthinkable stuff did seduce me into giving up financial gains in favour of “psychic income” – another of Prof Koh’s memorable phrases.

I joined IPS for two reasons. First, I wanted to work for Prof Koh because he was one of three great Singaporeans I always wanted to work for, the other two being Dr Goh Keng Swee and Mr J.Y. Pillay. I never got a chance to work for the legendary Deputy Prime Minister. My one direct encounter ended up with him



Mr Arun Mahizhnan speaking at the Impact of New Media on General Election 2011 conference.

scowling about the background music I had put for the documentary I produced on the new naval base in Pulau Brani. The rest of the documentary escaped uncut. On reflection, I know I would have been shot in short order by Dr Goh if I had ever worked for him. I had the satisfaction of serving Mr Pillay when I was invited to join a committee in SINDA, the self-help group set up for the educational development of Indians. It is just as well that I was a volunteer under Mr Pillay instead of an employee as I realised that this man, too, would have eased me out as he does not suffer fools. At least, now he says “hello” when we bump into each other.

I am happy to report that I have now worked in IPS for 22 years for the simple reason that Prof Koh is incapable of booting out any one. Also because all his able successors – Dr Lee Tsao Yuan, Ambassador Ong Keng Yong, and the current Director, Mr Janadas Devan – did not have the heart to fire someone he had hired.

My second reason for joining IPS was to serve the country in my own small way. Again, I am happy to report that that is exactly what it has been. In fact, my way has been so small, hardly anyone noticed. Lest you think it is out of some unbecoming modesty on my part, let me assure you that this is nothing short of strategic stealth. When you become too visible and too troublesome at the same time, it becomes a serious health hazard. So, while I have been troublesome on occasion, I have taken care not to offer any earth-shattering ideas drawing unwanted attention to myself. Though I had often been tempted to think the unthinkable – like a totally free media or totally uncensored arts – I had suppressed such heretic instincts and offered innovative ideas like making the Minister for Communication and Information the Editor of *The Straits Time* and *Lianhe Zaobao* instead of sending so many civil servants to editorial positions in the media. My Director did not think that this was very smart on my part and killed those ideas. Thus, even the few big ideas were exorcised from me so that I could continue to contribute in a small way, as befits my original mission in IPS. In fact, my Director is so fond of me that he has given me the best title I have ever had – Special Research Adviser, which is longer than the title he gave Prof Tommy Koh, who is only Special Adviser. And then he cut my salary by half on the grounds that I no longer do any work other than giving advice. There is a slight problem, though. For the past year that I have had the title, I have been trying to figure out whether I am an adviser on special research or a special adviser on research before giving any advice at all. This soul-searching on my part has led to the question, “Are you still with IPS?”, from colleagues on the same floor.

Finally, a word about the psychic income. My son has never stopped beating me up about the opportunity cost of several million dollars I would have earned in the last two decades had I remained in the private sector. You know how children always exaggerate their fathers’ capabilities. But he is duly concerned as he is the sole inheritor. I try to tell him how much I have benefited from joining IPS – the exposure to the best and the brightest in this country and elsewhere whose reflected glory set me in better light, the wonderful and better educated colleagues who have always humoured me as a wise old owl (not a fox, mind you!) and the numerous journalists who interviewed me for three hours to find a one-line gem. The list is endless. Unfortunately, my son still does not get it. He, a corporate lawyer, is not capable of thinking the unthinkable.