

## Thinking Ahead: An Interview with IPS Director Janadas Devan

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*In July 2011, Janadas Devan took over as Director of the Institute of Policy Studies. Nine months into his new job, he takes stock of developments at the institute under his watch and gives IPS Update a preview of various IPS projects in 2012 and beyond.*

**When you took over the directorship of IPS in July 2011, widening income inequality in Singapore was one of your primary areas of concern. Since convening IPS' flagship conference, Singapore Perspectives this year, many ideas about how to build a more inclusive society have been raised. What has emerged as most important from these discussions?**



I believe *Singapore Perspectives 2012* helped forge a climate of opinion around the consensus that income inequality is indeed a serious problem that we have to deal with collectively as a nation. The conference helped to align many stakeholders in society towards that common aim. We now agree that it is a serious issue, even if we disagree over the modalities of policy and what policy measures are most effective. This is where IPS can play an important role in providing a platform for discussion. Since *Singapore Perspectives*, we have continued with a series of closed door discussions on specific aspects of inequality such as social mobility and education, retirement funding and so on. These have been well-attended and have generated a lot of engagement among those in academia, policy making, civil society and the private sector.

**You have initiated a new professorial fellowship in honour of former president SR Nathan. What does IPS hope to achieve with this new fellowship?**

We are hoping to attract a researcher of a very high calibre – similar to the position of a professorial chair in a university – to deepen our analytical capacity, advance IPS' mission and influence its research agenda in the future.

**Can you tell us a bit more about what you believe IPS' mission is and about some of the projects IPS has in store this year and in the future?**

I believe IPS' mission is threefold. First, as a think-tank, we serve as a neutral platform for stakeholders to gather and discuss policy questions and issues of public interest. We facilitate this through our flagship conference, *Singapore Perspectives*, our biannual

Singapore Economic Roundtable, and other events such as our post-GE 2011 forum last year and our conference on the impact of new media on the election.

Second, our research aims to help contribute to discussions on current policy conundrums. We hold focused closed door discussions and our research fellows pursue research into issues such as immigration and integration, how we can respond to an ageing society with a low fertility rate, or help small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and lower income families and so forth. We also study the effects and perceptions of policies on the ground through our *Perception of Policies in Singapore (POPS) Surveys*.

On this front, we have two projects in the pipeline. One is to create a *Social Research Network*, which is modelled on our current involvement in the *Family Research Network*, a network that brings together scholars and practitioners in order to share ongoing research on national developments that affect the family. We also hope to launch a survey on race, language and religion in Singapore on a scale larger than has ever been done. This is an important and timely survey that will investigate the current state of attitudes and feelings among the different groups.

The third part of IPS' mission is in an area that I believe will need increasing focus: research that is future-oriented and that leans towards problem solving and policy making in 10, 15 or even 20 years. This is where we have two big projects in store this year:

The first is an expanded version of a previous IPS study on scenarios of future population growth and change in Singapore. The scenarios we released last year were widely reported in the press. This year, the demography and family cluster led by Dr Yap Mui Teng will embark on a second phase of this project that will include the non-resident population in its projections – ie, foreigners working in Singapore under the employment pass, special permit and work permit. The implications that these projections will have on various aspects of society will form the second part of the study. That is, we want to be able to empirically anticipate questions such as, if our population is x million, what does it mean for infrastructural requirements and how much do we need to invest in transportation and housing? If our population grows by x percent and we take in x number of foreigners, given this trajectory over x number of years, what are our anticipated expenses on healthcare, education and other social services? The projections will also have other important implications, such as the proportion of working age residents to the elderly and what effect that will have on our tax base. This is a complex, multi-disciplinary study that looks not just at demographic projections but also at their economic and social implications. We do not have the in-house capacity to complete such an undertaking successfully on our own. So we will need to facilitate a gathering of experts across different fields – as we have done before in studying other policy areas.

The second 'future-oriented' project we have in the pipeline is *IPS PRISM*. It aims to provide an opportunity for Singaporeans to think about the future and discuss how we will govern ourselves in 2022. Six groups of Singaporeans, representing various sectors and from a variety of backgrounds, will convene first separately and then together to discuss how the world at large, society, and political attitudes might evolve over the next ten years and what the drivers of change might be. These discussions will culminate in the generation of multiple 'scenarios' for the future, which will be exhibited later this year for the public to view and

respond to. The analysis of the responses we get from our scenarios will then feed into the theme of our flagship conference next year, *Singapore Perspectives 2013*, which will be on the theme of governance.

### How else does IPS hope to engage Singaporeans on policy issues this year?

We will be launching a new online forum, [www.ipsccommons.sg](http://www.ipsccommons.sg), in the near future to engage Singaporeans and others in informed policy discussion. We hope to feature ideas and voices not just from IPS but from guest columnists with a variety of points of view.

It seems to me that an incredible range of voices online are wild. It is not possible or productive to counter these voices. What we need to do is to expand the space for the 'rational' – for those who do want to proceed with rational discussion on serious issues. It doesn't matter if these voices are critical or disagree with established views, fervently or strongly even – so long as they belong to the same rational universe. That has to be the sole distinction: rational versus the non-rational. So long as we can expand the space of the rational, we would be making a useful contribution to the quality of online – as well as off-line – discussions.

We have access to people involved in policy making and various other stake-holders. We can involve them in our online forums and debates. Our off-line events can also be leveraged to advance discussion in a virtual space and reach out to more people. We are also exploring ways to feature structured debates on policy questions where people can weigh in on both sides of the coin.

### Any other hopes for what IPS can explore in the future?

One thing I have been struck by is the sense that none of us really has a fine-grained sense of the Singapore that exists today. I find that the categories we use in public discourse to describe developments in Singapore seem to have remained unchanged since the time I was in school, 40 years ago. These categories do not reflect society as it exists today, which is a far more complex society than the one I grew up in.

At present, we lack the capacity to acquire such a fine-grained sense of the attitudes, opinions and beliefs that exist in the Singapore of today. IPS is thus exploring the possibility of establishing a dedicated in-house survey unit for this purpose. This is a major undertaking and we are in the process of studying carefully what can be done, and consulting with experts both in Singapore and overseas.

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