

## IPS-Nathan Lectures: Ho Kwon Ping on Society and Identity

By Andrew Yeo  
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The fifth and final Institute of Policy Studies (IPS)-Nathan lecture by Mr Ho Kwon Ping took place on 9 April 2015 and drew an audience of 560 people. The topic of Mr Ho's lecture was [Society and Identity](#), and the dialogue session was moderated by Mr Janadas Devan, the Director of IPS.

In his 40-minute speech, Mr Ho, the 2014/15 S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore outlined his vision of a “cohesive diversity” which could underpin the Singapore identity, measures to improve social mobility, and his wish to see more information exchanged between government and civil society.

### ***Fostering a Cohesive Diversity***

Singapore is growing more diverse, and the ability of people and groups to form strong bonds and understand each other's views and beliefs has come under threat. Mr Ho identified instances of this increasing diversity — people are now more vocal about their lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) affiliations and support for alternative family structures. With immigration, intra-ethnic diversity has increased. Immigrants or foreign workers may be of the same race as Singaporeans, but their backgrounds and upbringing make them feel culturally different. There are also sharply contrasting socio-economic realities of people staying in HDB heartlands and others who frequent Marina Bay Sands and reside in Sentosa Cove.

These racial, social and economic cleavages could divide Singapore society, said Mr Ho, who called for people to be treated as “individuals and not categories”. Singapore, he said, should move into a post-CMIO (Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others) model that would better capture the nuanced complexities of people's socio-ethnic identities. “This is a strategic imperative not just for enriching the Singapore identity, but to continually attract the world's best talent and make this island the best city to live, work, and play,” he said.

To strengthen cohesive diversity, Singaporeans would also have to be more conscious of how they treat minorities. With Chinese forming over 70% of the population, Chinese Singaporeans should recognise their “Chinese privilege” and not engage in behaviour such as speaking in the language of the majority even when people of other races are present. Others who may form “fringe segments of society”, such as foreign workers and single mothers, but who contribute to Singapore, should also be recognised, he said.

### ***Improving Social Mobility***

Mr Ho devoted most of this portion of his speech to education. Singapore's education system is in danger of perpetuating inter-generational class stratification, rather than being a social leveller, he warned.

Citing three sets of statistics, he pointed to how 40% of students in primary schools live in HDB flats compared to 80% of all other students; 60% of Public Service Commission scholars come from the top schools of Raffles Institution and Hwa Chong Junior College; and how only 12% of fathers with primary education or less have children with university degrees, compared to 63% of university-educated fathers and 37% of those with secondary school qualifications.

Mr Ho proposed several reforms to the education system to return it to its original intent of levelling the playing field. First, PSLE exams should be scrapped, to place less academic pressure on students early on in life and allow more time for teachers to focus on the personal development of students. Next, he called for a closer look at existing admission mechanisms into schools based on home proximity. Delinking the housing and education markets is crucial because the elite schools are located in the wealthiest parts of the island, he said. He also called for the replacement of the gifted education stream with a more multi-faceted programme that focuses on the special needs of all children. This, he said, would help develop the potential of all students. The GCE 'A' Level system could also be augmented with a Singapore-style SAT, to include psychometric tests. Noting that the civil service has already tweaked its recruitment scheme to give non-graduates a better chance of progressing, he suggested they also consider changing the recruitment criteria for its Administrative Service — the most elite cadre of civil servants — to encompass psychometric and aptitude tests.

### ***Civil Society and Information***

Mr Ho called for a more collaborative style of governance, especially in light of the abundance of debate regarding the directions Singapore should take in a post-Lee Kuan Yew era. But this culture of participatory democracy, he said, can only work if civil society is actively engaged in decision-making. For this to happen, he called for freely available and largely unrestricted information for civil society players.

Instead of a Freedom of Information Act, which other countries have but which is not always meaningful, the government could consider having a Code on Information Disclosure. This code would not be legally enforceable but would be morally binding, spelling out the principles to which ministries should hold themselves.

Putting out more data to the public would inevitably result in different interpretations of data, but critical enquiry and continual search for the truth would stand the next generation in good stead as they begin to play a more active role in Singapore's future, Mr Ho argued. "We should trust in our young people enough to allow space for them to develop their own opinions. In the end, our future leaders of Singapore should be bold enough to own the future rather than defend the past," he said.

In wrapping up his speech, Mr Ho spent time reflecting on his own story and his sense of being Singaporean. “Singapore is my home because whoever I was, or am now, or want to be, I feel I can be that person here. However, this statement of pride is not universal. I am fortunate because I am a privileged, Chinese, heterosexual, male businessman. Can other persons, whose music is the silent spaces between the notes, also believe what I just said, so that we can honestly declare that cohesive diversity — this delightful oxymoron — is the unique marker of the Singapore identity? For the sake of the next 50 years, I fervently hope that we can, and will,” he said.

### **Question and Answer Session**

Mr Devan began by thanking Mr Ho for delivering five lectures that had drawn a diverse audience, which had grown in numbers over the course of the lecture series. This was testament to the relevance of the IPS-Nathan Lectures as a platform to discuss policy issues.

Mr Devan posed the first question to Mr Ho, noting that the Singapore identity had always been one which accommodated diversity and difference, but whether fault lines could emerge in future because of this. Mr Ho responded by saying that it would be problematic if any future government attempts to “establish the primacy of a particular ethnic group, through the primacy of a particular language or religion”. Pointing to how Sri Lanka used to be quite a cohesive society, and how Tamils and Sinhalese used to co-exist, he identified how establishing Sinhalese as the official language ignited a series of events that ultimately led to fractious tensions between the two groups. While the CMIO model should be blurred, Singaporeans should also be conscious to not allow members from any particular race to establish themselves as the primary one.

A member of the audience asked if it was worrying that the Singapore identity was tied to economic pragmatism and material success. The Singapore Story, he said, was one of transition from a third to first world country, led ably by the late Lee Kuan Yew. That narrative had its risks, the member noted, saying that as economic progress slowed, Singaporeans’ sense of national identity might diminish too. Mr Ho disagreed, saying that he did not feel that economic pragmatism was an intrinsic part of the Singapore identity. The sense of appreciation Singaporeans had for Mr Lee’s work did not necessarily mean that Singaporeans took economic success per se as a part of their identity. The sense of gratitude one had for Mr Lee or the People’s Action Party (PAP) should not be confused for what binds Singapore together as a society, he noted.

Another member highlighted the strong work ethic of Singaporeans, which was in contrast to the low sense of engagement they supposedly felt. Recent studies pointed to Singaporeans being among the unhappiest people in the world. Why was this so and should there be another narrative to galvanise Singaporeans to contribute to the nation’s wellbeing? Mr Ho quipped that Singaporeans were not an unhappy lot but an “under-happy” people, referencing findings from the national survey by the Singapore Human Resources Institute and consulting firm Align Group in 2014. On a more serious note, he observed that many Singaporeans derived a lot of emotional satisfaction from work; a positive characteristic that took the nation from third world to first. “We have to recognise the fact that we are a hard-driving people,” he said.

Mr Ho attempted to debunk notions that the millennial generation is less hardworking compared to those of previous generations. “You find that millennials are very hardworking, putting in a lot of time of their own, but for things that they believe in,” he said. The onus should thus fall partly on employers to try to harness this energy so that these younger employees would give their best, he added.

A member of the audience asked if Singapore was ready for a non-Chinese Prime Minister, and if so, whether this would affect the country’s international standing and ties with countries like China and Taiwan. Mr Ho, pointing to how America voted for President Barack Obama, said it was difficult to measure readiness, but that he was confident that the current generation would vote for candidates based on merit. However, he conceded that if there were two candidates of equal calibre but of different races, there would likely be racial affinities. If the PAP, however, were to put forth a candidate of calibre, he saw no reason why Singaporeans would disagree with the appointment based on race, pointing to how Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam is extremely popular with Singaporeans today. Singapore’s relationship with other countries should also not be a consideration in our choice of Prime Minister as Singapore is a sovereign nation, he said.

Another audience member picked up on Mr Ho’s comments on moving beyond the CMIO model and asked if it had been necessary for several media publications to describe the recent appointment of Mr Masagos Zulkifli to full minister as the first time that the Cabinet had two Malay Ministers. Also, were ethnic quotas in HDB estates still relevant? The audience member said he believed we should not “engineer our neighbourhoods so that it is a reflection of the different racial groups, but a reflection of us — Singaporeans”.

Mr Ho said his personal opinion was more nuanced. He did not feel that it was necessarily bad for the government to have such indicators, and added that while he did support the blurring of the CMIO lines, he was aware of the danger that it could become “an excuse for a majority race to no longer be cognisant of the fact that minorities have to be very consciously supported in terms of their presence in Cabinet, in leadership positions elsewhere and so on”. We should move beyond a simplistic CMIO model, he said, but it should never be used as an excuse to not continue sending signals to all minority groups in Singapore that Singapore is a truly multiracial and multicultural place to be living in. “Diversity in Singapore cannot be just a lip-service term, but a living reality,” he said.

In concluding the dialogue, Mr Ho urged Singaporeans to develop and voice their ideas of the kind of Singapore they want to live in. “In this messy exchange of ideas and opinions, we all learn something from each other. We may look from the outside, to be less orderly and consensual than in the past. After all, civil society is not a disciplined army; it is not an organised orchestra producing the soothing melodies of a lovely symphony. It is a loud cacophony of voices, of disorganised aspirations, of an exciting market place of ideas,” he concluded.

Mr Devan then closed the lecture by announcing that the next S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore, would be Mr [Bilahari Kausikan](#), Ambassador-at-Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Mr Kausikan’s term will begin in August 2015 and more information on his lecture series will be available on the IPS website then.

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