

Singapore Perspectives Conference 2021: Reset The Values and Qualities of Leadership

By Ruby THIAGARAJAN

The eighth forum of Singapore Perspectives 2021 was on the [“Values and Qualities of Leadership”](#). It was moderated by Dr Gillian Koh, Deputy Director (Research) at the Institute of Policy Studies. The panel’s speakers were Ambassador Chan Heng Chee, Ambassador-at-Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Professor Margaret Heffernan, Professor of Practice at the University of Bath. Discussants on the panel were Mr Han Fook Kwang, Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, and Madam Zuraidah Abdullah, Chief Executive Officer of Yayasan MENDAKI. Dr Koh introduced the session by posing questions about the types and qualities of leaders that will be needed to navigate the challenges of the next decade.

Opening Remarks by Ambassador Chan Heng Chee

Ambassador Chan began her opening remarks by inviting the audience to think back to the events of the last decade and how the world has been preparing for a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) moment. COVID-19 has been that VUCA moment and has served as a global wake-up call. She emphasised that the most successful states during the COVID-19 crisis have had good leaders with competent policies and the ability to communicate them. In her view, good leadership qualities include responsiveness and an appetite for risk. A vital trait of good leadership for Singapore is the ability to be bold and seek to instil a culture of daring to try. Some degree of risk taking is a necessary quality to be innovative and relevant and to be ready for the political landscape of the future.

Ambassador Chan dedicated significant time outlining the issue of diversity in leadership. Leadership circles should reflect the diversity of the population and should also strive to understand the evolving diversity of this population, she said. This might include gender diversity, sexual diversity as in the LGBTQ community, and ethnic diversity. Future leadership circles should also reflect a diversity of age and be intergenerational.

Opening Remarks by Professor Margaret Heffernan

Professor Heffernan began by giving the example of a consensus-building exercise undertaken by the government of Ireland when considering a referendum on the issue of abortion. The government assembled a group of people who were representative of the population and involved them in a long process of sharing and deliberation, resulting in recommendations to government. The eventual referendum results ended up being very similar to the recommendations of the Citizens’ Assembly. According to Professor Heffernan, it was remarkable that even those who did not like the outcome of the decision accepted its

legitimacy because of the transparency of the exercise. This approach had not been an abnegation of leadership but rather the essence of it, because it expressed trust in citizens and embraced a capacity for change. She explained that essential qualities for leadership in the coming years include the capacity for humility and the ability to think long-term by understanding that decisions made have effects for future generations.

Open strategy values a plurality of voices, but the broadening of participation is not a substitute for decision making, which is the essential work of leaders. Good decisions can be both explained and understood, and this solidifies their legitimacy. Professor Heffernan also said there is a need globally to develop leaders who treat citizens not as passive children but as mature adults that participate in the making of their future.

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Caption for photo: Madam Zuraidah Abdullah responds to the speakers' opening remarks.

Discussion and Q&A

Mr Han said both speakers framed the leadership issues well and agreed with Ambassador Chan's points about developing a culture of daring to try. He also affirmed Prof. Heffernan's comments about the relationship between leaders and the people and how important it is to build this trust. He said the question about leadership has a special place in Singapore because of the constant refrain since 1965 about the country being highly dependent on strong leadership. He said the early leaders were value-driven — the values of meritocracy, rule of law, no tolerance for corruption — and that was what made them successful. People understand values more than they understand policies, he added. Leaders stand out from the crowd if they are seen as real people. They need to have feelings, convictions, keep their word, and be one with the people. Leadership is not about the message but the person behind the message, and it is less about competence than character and morality. While competence is important, it can also be delivered by a professionally run civil service and paid professionals. Moral leadership is about shaping values and shared future, he added.

Ms Zuraidah shared Mr Han's and Ambassador Chan's views on the importance of daring to try. She emphasised the need to relook failures and to think about them instead as learning experiences. Singapore needs a society that allows a new brand of leaders to thrive — and should not be quick to condemn leaders when they make mistakes. She also echoed Ambassador Chan's views on diversity and said that a diversity of profiles needs to be valued during the recruitment stage. Ms Zuraidah argued that failure should be valued as it makes individuals more resilient and adept at facing setbacks, and that success is not the path to learning. She also underscored the importance of mentoring in inspiring future leaders and developing their value systems.

In the question-and-answer section, the panellists were asked about how Singapore's leaders should strike the balance between engagement (and listening to the population) and making difficult decisions that may not please everyone. They were also asked about how Singapore could create space for oppressed voices and to engage in deliberative democracy. Professor Heffernan responded that it is important to include all voices, including oppressed voices, in conversations. It is not just about who is speaking but who is listening. She returned to the example of the Irish Citizens' Assembly and described how it was very detailed and meticulous with a great commitment to transparency. This transparency was a crucial part of its success. Difficult and sometimes unpopular decisions must be arrived at legitimately, in order to be accepted.

Ambassador Chan said Singaporean society expects its leaders to be able to make difficult decisions, but this trait cannot be the only measure of leadership. Dr Koh asked her about the issue of LGBTQ+ rights and whether or not the leadership should take the lead or take cues from society. Ambassador Chan responded that she would lean on the side of leading the issue but admitted that it was a difficult choice for the government to make. She also suggested that should a vote be made on this issue, the LGBTQ+ community might not see the outcome that they want.

Mr Han said that the government is listening more than it had in the 1960s but that it tends to be defensive because the ruling party has been in power for so long. He recommended that the government expand its pool of thought leaders. Ms Zuraidah affirmed this and also suggested that the government be open to listening to opinions on topics that are not of their choosing.

The panellists were also asked about involving the millennial generation in leadership. Ms Zuraidah emphasised the importance of intergenerational leadership and participation and said that MENDAKI has been opening the floor to younger leaders more and listening to their opinions. They might not agree on issues, but it is important to open that channel of communication. Prof. Heffernan brought up the example of shadow boards that organisations assemble to include more diversity in voices and suggested that more organisations try that option.

Finally, the panellists gave their opinions about global leadership. Ambassador Chan stated that leaders could not gain prominence on a global stage unless they have done well by their own citizens. The panel also agreed on the issue of sacrifice, stating that it should be a value for both leaders and society to inculcate. As strong leadership cannot be guaranteed, sacrifice and collaboration are both important pillars of a more resilient society.

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**IPS is grateful to the following organisations for their support of
IPS and Singapore Perspectives 2021:**



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