



## Singapore Perspectives 2024: Youth Closing Dialogue with Dr Janil Puthucheary

By Shaw Wen Xuan

The closing dialogue of Singapore Perspectives 2024 featured Dr Janil Puthucheary, Senior Minister of State at the Ministry of Communications and Information and the Ministry of Health, and Chairman of OnePeople.sg and Young People's Action Party (PAP). The dialogue was moderated by Dr Kalpana Vignehsa, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

While the various panels offered thematic spaces for conversations around youths, this one-hour question-and-answer closing dialogue was designed with an open format to freely discuss and elaborate on issues pertinent to youths' experiences.

Dr Vignehsa first shared a result from the Singapore Perspectives pre-conference survey, which showed that young women were less interested in getting married (21–34 years) and having children (21–49 years) than men in the same age categories. This result is consistent with her experience as an academic, hearing from young women, and offers a widely held interpretation that patriarchal norms continue to dominate the familial and caregiving spheres that women navigate, despite strides in gender equality. Dr Vignehsa also offered the idea that women worry about becoming primarily responsible for both the visible and invisible costs of familial labour and having to contribute to “endless vortexes” of work and family.

## Question-and-Answer Session



*Caption for photo: Dr Janil Puthucheary (pictured, left) speaking with Dr Kalpana Vignehsa at Singapore Perspectives 2024.*

Dr Vignehsa fielded the first two questions for Dr Puthucheary to kickstart the session, with subsequent questions from attendees via microphones or through the online Pigeonhole platform.

**Q:** How do you think we need to respond to the inequities of familial labour? How should we adapt our notions of what it means to be a man or a woman as caregiving becomes a more significant role in our lives?

**A:** Dr Puthucheary acknowledged that gendered social norms have shifted over time, citing his observation of mothers' and fathers' greater sharing of caregiving responsibilities and duties. While he conceded that men must continue to do more, he asserted that every family should have agency and space to define their familial values and practices in the context of their demographic background and the individual assessments that they make based on their domestic circumstances. Society should accept "that there are multiple ways of doing this", he noted, and acknowledge that progress has been made in renegotiating these gendered caregiving roles.

Dr Vignehsa added that young women might be reacting to the burnout observed in older women or their own mothers. Dr Puthucheary responded by re-affirming any young woman's life choices and cautioned against penalising any choice. He shared his hope for Singapore

to be a society "where every opportunity is put on the table" for a younger woman and called for family members to assist these younger women in their navigation of life decisions, bearing in mind the difficulties of women having to choose between their career and childbearing, should they choose to do so.

**Q:** Dr Vignehsa highlighted managing diversity as a society as an emergent theme throughout the panels. Diversity extends to how we define family or whether we become a more politically plural society, and the discussion often consists of trade-offs between diversity and stability.

**A:** Responding to the statement, Dr Puthucheary stated that the diversity conversation contains "some subtle differences qualitatively, which have an outsized impact" and that Singapore should manage diversity by reducing polarisation and fragmentation. He listed race, language and religion as "three archetypes of social division" and potential sources for diversity or fragmentation, depending on the framing of the issue. However, he noted that Singapore's policy approach has consistently maintained a strong sense of national cohesion.

Dr Puthucheary also distinguished between coming to a consensus — where everyone must agree on a single view — and an agreement to be cohesive and productive in seeking progress on diversity, remarking that the latter is the approach taken by Singapore. He underlined the need to bring people from different camps together, specifically between those seeking diversity and change and those comfortable with the status quo.

**Q:** Dr Puthucheary, you talked about these groups coming together, and in your work, you may know of groups on opposing sides. Are you seeing them come together, how are they coming together, and are they talking to one another?

**A:** Dr Puthucheary shared that his work at OnePeople.sg involved engaging multiple networks, community groups and organisations, and that most can find common ground in private conversations. He pointed to this as evidence supporting the perspective that many Singaporeans do not find polarisation and fragmentation productive or helpful in progressing our society. He closed his response by reiterating the need for a continuous effort to give people "good reasons to seek common ground".

**Q:** We have heard very little about young people with mental and physical disabilities. Do you think we could do more in integration and protection against discrimination?

**A:** Dr Puthucheary replied that integration should be improved for the entire population while acknowledging the anxieties of the impact of discrimination. He urged the need to look beyond the co-location of facilities, which engineers spaces within contexts such as education institutions that people eventually graduate from. He added that there are opportunities for better integration in the workforce, where solutions could arise from redesigning jobs and processes and upskilling human resource, amongst others. He noted that this is an area of development the government is currently looking into.

Addressing the issue of workplace discrimination, Dr Puthucheary said that screening questions for job applicants must be relevant to the job. An example is screening questions about viral diseases for applications to medical school, to highlight the need to protect the eventual patients. At the same time, Dr Puthucheary asserted there should not be an absolutist

position on mental illnesses and that employees who develop such conditions should be allowed to rotate roles and kept in employment while ensuring safety for themselves and the people that they work with.

Dr Puthucheary currently chairs the Inter-agency Taskforce on Mental Health and Well-being, and upcoming parliamentary debates on 5–7 February 2024 will address issues such as mental health discrimination and integration at the workplace. He noted that “we have to find a way to be proactively inclusive, we should have the same attitude towards people with mental health illnesses as well.”

**Q:** More LGBTQ+ youths are coming out and at a younger age. They are much more articulate about the issues that matter to them, but it has been seen that LGBTQ+ youths do not believe in a future for them in Singapore. What is your message to LGBTQ+ youths?

**A:** Dr Puthucheary called for youths to “stay, fight, stand up for what you believe in — in a way that brings inclusion, brings every Singaporean with you on that journey”. He acknowledged that there is active contestation of their beliefs. However, there must be continued discourse and engagement surrounding LGBTQ+ issues, drawing on the repeal of Penal Code 377A and the efforts of Pink Dot as an example of how aspirations and society might change over time with active engagement.

Dr Puthucheary also called for youths engage with other Singaporeans despite the inevitability of a difference of opinion. This would be essential to realising a more inclusive vision for Singapore, he said.

**Q:** The government’s approach in policymaking is to benefit as many people as possible. But with this, some people always fall through the cracks. Taking care of the 99 per cent means slowly letting go of the 1 per cent, which, in the case of Singapore, would mean that we are not looking at 55,000 people. The government’s reach is limited, and it cannot tend to everybody’s needs. How can youths position themselves in a way to better recognise these people who slip through the cracks, and what can we do in our own capacity to help them?

**A:** Dr Puthucheary disagreed with the notion that caring for the majority necessitates neglecting the minority, instead offering the perspective that Singapore can support both groups concurrently. In considering Singapore’s policy approach, the distribution of state resources has always been to prioritise the most vulnerable and challenged within society and to ensure maximal support for these families. He cautioned against disregarding the welfare of any minority population in Singapore.

**Q:** Does meritocracy in its current form encourage and propagate generational inequality? Families of high socio-economic standing can fund the development of their children, feeding them to the top. What are your thoughts on meritocracy to ensure fairness?

**A:** Dr Puthucheary said there has been a conflation of the concepts of generational inequality and meritocracy, stating that the problems of generational inequality should not be borne entirely by the meritocratic system, which essentially depends on its operations and measures to ensure fairness. He likened meritocracy to democracy as a “least worst system”, requiring adjustments and careful attention to detail on policies regarding education, welfare, economic

redistribution or growth to ensure its effectiveness in addressing the needs of Singaporeans now and in the future.

Eliminating any inequities for children is an unworkable intervention, he added, and the focus should instead be on supporting children and families that lack the benefits of intergenerational transfers through designed interventions and programmes such as UPLIFT (Uplifting Pupils in Life and Inspiring Families Taskforce) and investments in early childhood. This approach requires integrating knowledge from various service and care professions, including educators, social workers and care workers, to promote an equitable and inclusive society.

**Q:** How do you find your role as the party whip for the PAP, and what value do you see in this role regarding Singapore's larger political system?

**A:** Dr Puthuchery said he was primarily responsible for party discipline and the organisation of party business within Parliament. He asserted that membership within a political party cannot be about convenience but should also represent party values beyond the myriad of views and values that individual members may adopt. Party views and values serve as a basis for accountability towards the people of Singapore.

The party whip is responsible for providing a platform for debate, discourse and development of new ideas. Most importantly, the role serves to build consensus within the political party, ensuring that ideas that could impact people's lives are executed or implemented in a timely manner. He explained that he serves to move party membership towards a consensus while protecting a space for them to air their diversity of views and engage in discourse.

**Q:** What is one area of concern that keeps you awake at night that you feel we should focus on?

**A:** Dr Puthuchery shared his worries about polarisation and fragmentation due to the availability of structural incentives with recent technological and industry shifts. Taking an example from voting at general elections, Dr Puthuchery noted how the process may be polarising as it necessitated a choice between dichotomies, which has led to ideological polarisations in other societies. In the spirit of political contestation and democracy, Singaporeans must make a choice at the ballot yet retain a common identity as “one people” committed to improving society.

Dr Vignehsa recalled a photo from the last general election where a couple, one dressed in blue and one in white,<sup>1</sup> went to vote together. She suggested that we celebrate such occurrences as they indicate political maturity. However, she shared that there was still a public perception that youths are not sufficiently politically mature, which was often proffered as the reason for why we could not lower the voting age.

**Q:** How can we develop a politically virtuous and politically conscious society? Is this something we should strive towards and expect of our citizenry? How do we encourage critical thought in our education? If a formal political education curriculum has too many risks, how

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<sup>1</sup> Referring to the colours typically associated with opposing political parties in Singapore, with blue denoting support for the Workers' Party and white denoting support for the incumbent People's Action Party.

can youths educate themselves about politics without being radicalised, and what would be the most pertinent topics or concepts in doing so?

**A:** Dr Puthucheary disagreed with the notion that Singaporean youths lack political maturity. Singaporeans “undersell” themselves in this respect, and he cited examples of youths showing up at community and grassroots events and how youths at the Singapore Perspectives conference had actively spoken up about issues that mattered to them. Beyond youths, Dr Puthucheary also raised examples of engagement in everyday settings, such as at coffee shops or in taxis. To him, this continued engagement indicated mature political awareness amongst youths.

He also noted areas of improvement for political engagement in Singapore, citing “white spaces” in formal education in Singapore, where teachers use guiding frameworks to collaborate with students to establish topics of interest and source materials, engaging youths on issues of the day. He stated, however, that political education must not cease after the end of formal education. Singaporeans need to continue to be engaged in active citizenry through the many organisations available in the civil space and to continue to drive engagement for future generations.

**Q:** Environmental activism in Singapore, in general, has accelerated and evolved in the past few years, and we have seen a lot of diversity in the different issues that they now cover.

However, there are some criticisms of environmental groups as being critical of policies but not offering any solutions. At the same time, other groups say that is not the role of civil society, that the role of civil society should be to shed light on the issues within those policies and leave the technical expertise for solutions with others.

What kind of role should civil society play? Is it more of a solution provider, or should it be more of a “problem highlighter”? What is the most effective approach for civil society to engage within Singapore’s unique political system?

**A:** Drawing on engagements with youths as chairman of Young PAP, Dr Puthucheary said civil societies must have space for both roles as technical solution providers and as policy observers — and be open to extending their roles towards one another. He warned against rigidly adopting one role, as civil societies may narrow their contributions to the collaborative process of designing and solutioning, underscoring the possibility and value of fulfilling these dual roles within activism and policymaking.

**Q:** There are many narratives and ideas out there that are very interesting to people, but not every idea is in people’s best interests. We see this playing out in terms of very radical narratives adopted by people, and you see the damage it has done to societies.

One way to find common ground is to have common knowledge or various common sources of information. I am wondering if there is room not just to encourage young people to participate in political dialogues or social discussions, but also more room for the government to release more information and data so that more meaningful discussions and more meaningful analyses can be done, even at younger ages, so that we can also then participate better without being sucked into prevalent narratives that may not be in our best interests.

**A:** Dr Puthucheary highlighted current government efforts in data sharing, such as the data.gov.sg platform, which attempts to increase the amount of data sharing from the public sector. However, he also cautioned against associating the quantity of data being uploaded to the resolution of problems of misinformation, as the availability of data may also allow individuals or organisations to manipulate or cherry-pick data to confirm biased worldviews, especially when data is collected in specific contexts and may need some understanding of the scientific process to scrutinise the quality or origin of the data. He called for a need to consider the curation of data sharing. In the meantime, educators, the media and academics will continue to be front and centre in knowledge production and sharing in Singapore.

**Q:** How should the government regulate the mental health sector? Would further regulation help people seek and receive the right mental health care?

**A:** Dr Puthucheary shared more about the strategy currently implemented by the Inter-agency Taskforce on Mental Health and Well-being, stating that multiple components of the plan had focused on increasing system capacity, improving capabilities and ultimately, shifting the focus of the discussions to where mental health interventions or services may be provided, how services should be provided, and community engagement strategies focused on a mass provision of mental health services and support. Within those components, taskforce had also considered regulation.

While current medical or social services have well-established regulatory measures, Dr Puthucheary said that capacity and capability development must continue to be the priority of building up mental health services as it will address pertinent issues regarding quality of service, accessibility, care delivery and integration. Once there is better accessibility will the question of regulation be addressed as more types of skills and professionals become increasingly involved in the space. Eventually, measures will be designed to protect individuals seeking help through a defined set of regulations. However, this remains to be considered.

**Q:** Is it possible to give youths, such as students, an important space to speak in, such as Parliament? How much power do you think the youth can be given?

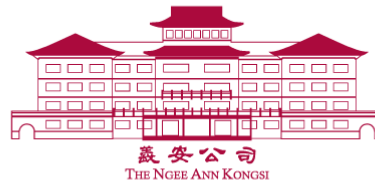
**A:** While Dr Puthucheary spotlighted ForwardSG sessions, Model United Nations and the HarmonyWorks! conference, he also spoke about other organisations which provided space and platforms where young people could show up to ask questions and speak their minds, appealing to the youth to take full advantage of such platforms to air their views.

Dr Puthucheary reaffirmed the power and contributions that youths are making in these public dialogues by reflecting the presence of key members of leadership, community and politics. He shared that these key members are present as they are keen on learning and hearing from youths about the latter's concerns and plans to progress and participate in nation building. Dr Puthucheary closed the dialogue by affirming youths' agency in advocating for issues that they believe in.

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