



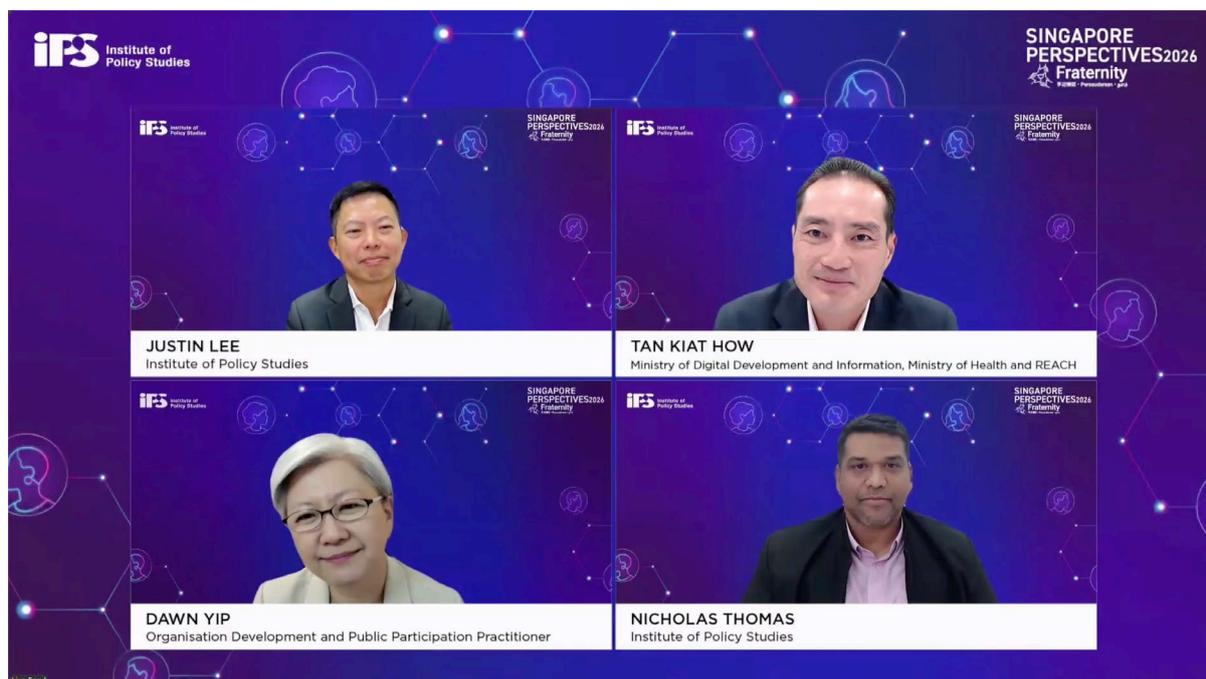
**Singapore Perspectives 2026: “Fraternity”**  
**New Ways to Talk Through Tough Topics: Testing Different Modalities of**  
**Citizen Engagement**

By Joscelyn Chong

**Background**

The second panel session for Singapore Perspectives 2026, titled “New Ways to Talk Through Tough Topics: Testing Different Modalities of Citizen Engagement”, explored the multitude of citizen engagement modalities adopted to facilitate safe, inclusive and constructive conversations on potentially difficult topics in Singapore. Facilitated by Dr Justin Lee, Senior Research Fellow and Head, Policy Lab at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), the session featured three panellists who offered different perspectives on citizen engagement. They spoke about the government’s role in public engagement and how public engagement had evolved over the past three to four decades. They also provided insights from a recent experiment using the Consensus Conference deliberative process to explore stakeholders’ views on local-foreign integration issues. The panellists were:

- Mr Tan Kiat How, Senior Minister of State (SMS), Ministry of Digital Development and Information, Ministry of Health and Chairman, REACH
- Ms Dawn Yip, Organisation Development and Public Participation Practitioner, and
- Mr Nicholas Thomas, Research Fellow, IPS.



*Caption for photo: Discussion among Dr Justin Lee (top, left), Mr Tan Kiat How (top, right), Ms Dawn Yip (bottom, left), and Mr Nicholas Thomas (bottom, right), during Panel 2 of the IPS Singapore Perspectives 2026 Conference (Online Session).*

The session began with a video screening of IPS Policy Lab’s experiments on two modalities, or approaches, to citizen engagement: Consensus Conference and Citizens Reassembled. The video showcased the Consensus Conference piloted by IPS Policy Lab in November 2025. The Consensus Conference is a method or process that brings together citizens from different walks of life representing different groups, to discuss or deliberate a sensitive, challenging issue (i.e., “tough topic”) in a structured and safe setting, with a view to eventually reaching certain common grounds that all can accept.

The session in November was organised by Policy Lab’s Dr Lee and Mr Thomas. It brought together Singapore citizens, permanent residents and foreigners living in Singapore to discuss the issue of integrating immigrants into local community, i.e., local-foreign integration, often an emotive topic in Singapore. Participants of the conference received an information kit with background information on the issue. They then met an expert who spoke on topic and clarified questions they raised. Subsequently, the participants proposed and responded to statements they drafted on community life, jobs, education, openness and multiculturalism relating to integration. They then deliberated on each statement based on this core criterion: “Can I live with this?” Statements that received 100% consensus from participants became the common ground. Statements that did not receive full consensus were further discussed and refined. Finally, the participants drafted a Residents’ Report. They also designed a community project collectively.

The video also featured another citizen deliberation process — Citizens Reassembled — which relates to an upcoming project by the Policy Lab. In Citizens Reassembled, people with different — often divergent — viewpoints will be intentionally brought together in small groups to discuss and ideate solutions to the specific issue.

Following the video screening, Dr Lee invited the panellists to each take turns to share their views on citizen engagement, before the discussion was opened to the conference audience for a question-and-answer segment.

### **The Citizen Engagement Landscape in Singapore**

Ms Yip spoke first, highlighting three key shifts in the Singapore government's efforts in citizen engagement: (a) from “feedback” to “feed-forward”, (b) from “issue-based engagement” to “broad-based engagement” and (c) from “consultation” to “co-creation”.

### ***Three key shifts in citizen engagement***

First, citizen engagement has evolved from “feedback” to “feed-forward”. Ms Yip, who has previously worked in the public sector including about 25 years in citizen engagement, explained that feedback refers to views provided by the public on existing policies and programmes. The government set up the Feedback Unit in the 1980s to formally collect feedback from the public. After a few decades, the government adopted the “feed-forward” approach by seeking the public’s views *before* programmes and policies are put in place. These views are then fed into programme and policy designs before implementation. Ms Yip highlighted the introduction of bills as one area where the feed-forward approach has been adopted by the government. A draft of the bill is often published for public feedback, which will then be taken into consideration as part of the legislation design.

Second, Ms Yip noted the shift from what she termed as “issue-based engagement” to “broad-based engagement”. In issue-based engagement, the public would be engaged on specific issues such as public housing, education and healthcare sustainability. This contrasts with broad-based engagement whereby the public would be invited to shape the broad national agenda in national conversations, such as Forward Singapore.

Third, citizen engagement has shifted from “consultation” to “co-creation”. In consultation mode, while the government would seek views from the public, the decision-making power was still largely held by political leaders. In recent years, however, “consultation” has been complemented by “co-creation”, in which the public is invited to be part of the deliberation and ideation process. Ms Yip referred to the earlier video screening as an example of co-creation.

In sum, citizen engagement has broadened and deepened over the last four decades. The shifts in citizen engagement happened in response to changes observed in Singapore and internationally, said Ms Yip. She noted that Singaporeans have aspirations and appetite to be engaged, and the challenging external governance environment requires decisions with challenging trade-offs. Accordingly, the growing difficult topics necessitate new engagement modalities, she said.

### ***Invitations to new ways of engagement***

Ms Yip concluded her sharing by inviting organisational leaders and conveners of conversations to reflect on the level of engagement in their decision-making process and to explore new engagement methods, details of which were subsequently discussed by Mr Thomas later in the panel discussion. Additionally, Ms Yip encouraged those in the corporate sector and general public to participate actively in citizen engagement. She cited REACH and the Singapore Government Partnerships Office as participation platforms for the public to provide views and receive support on causes that they care about.

Finally, Ms Yip advised that mutual empathy and patience are important as people learn new ways to interact with one another — particularly with difficult topics.

### **Government's Role in Citizen Engagement**

Building on Ms Yip's sharing on the citizen engagement landscape, SMS Tan elaborated on the role of the government in building bridges amid changes in the local environment.

### ***Singapore's Economic and Social Composition Transformation***

SMS Tan began by providing an overview of the economic and demographic shifts in Singapore in the last 60 years. With an increasingly diverse community in Singapore (e.g., inter-ethnic marriages, transnational families) he noted that it was unsurprising to see resultant shifts in people's values and views. He also cautioned about the global impact of social media in escalating disunity. Referencing the conference theme, SMS Tan emphasised the importance of "fraternity", which speaks to REACH's work in community building.

### ***Evolution of REACH and experiments with engagement modalities***

SMS Tan shared REACH's origin as a feedback unit that sought the public's feedback on specific issues. However, REACH's role has since evolved to facilitate community building through interactions and collaboration. For example, REACH has piloted over 10 engagement modalities ranging from interactive theatre and gamification to Consensus Conference — to encourage constructive conversations that strengthen mutual understanding. Citing the Consensus Conference experiment, which was well-received by most participants and led to the collective authorship of a report, SMS Tan commented that collaboration amidst difference is possible when the "right conditions for fraternity" are put in place.

SMS Tan concluded by reflecting on the shared responsibility implied in social cohesion. While the government can foster the necessary conditions, people must be receptive to differences and collaboration. "Let us choose connection over division in our daily interactions. Let us embrace conversations that may feel uncomfortable but are necessary and let's build Singapore together," he encouraged.

### **Consensus Conference Experiment**

The third panellist, Mr Thomas, presented findings from the Consensus Conference held by Policy Lab in collaboration with REACH, on the topic of local-foreign integration in Singapore. He began with a poll asking conference participants to vote on the possibility of reaching 100% consensus among a group of people from different backgrounds.

### ***Rationale of the Consensus Conference***

Noting that the proportion of non-residents has grown from about 3% of the population in 1970 to about 31% in 2025, Mr Thomas said this demographic shift prompted Policy Lab to test Consensus Conference as a way to engage the public on local-foreign integration. Citing Prime Minister Lawrence Wong's social media post stating that "Singapore is and has always been an immigrant nation," Mr Thomas asked whether Singapore "can continue to welcome newcomers while maintaining social cohesion". Referencing research by renowned American political scientist Robert Putnam on social capital, Mr Thomas noted Putnam's finding that in diverse communities, residents tend to "trust neighbours less and participate less in civic life". Conversely, Putnam also noted that "diverse societies *can* develop new forms of solidarity"

and build social capital that bridge across different communities. This informed the Policy Lab's experiment with using Consensus Conference to explore whether structured deliberation and quality facilitation can build social capital that bridges local and foreign communities in Singapore.

### ***Insights from the Consensus Conference experiment***

Mr Thomas then introduced the concept of Consensus Conference and how Policy Lab experimented with this approach in citizen engagement on the sensitive topic of local-foreign integration. Developed in Denmark, Consensus Conference is a structured deliberative process that surfaces tensions and allows common ground to emerge. In the Policy Lab experiment, 24 participants were recruited (two-third Singaporeans and one-third non-Singaporeans) to test two hypotheses: (a) the attainability of 100% consensus in Singapore and; (b) "whether deliberation could translate into action". Safeguards against false consensus, protection of dissent and immediate documentation of no-go zones were also established.

Based on the experiment findings, 23 out of 67 participant-generated statements achieved the seemingly impossible unanimous consensus. Mr Thomas attributed this finding to two factors: (a) participants' willingness to listen, be persuaded and find common ground, and (b) Singapore's civic culture. However, Mr Thomas highlighted that consensus varied across four domains or themes: community life achieved the highest consensus followed by education, employment and multiculturalism. The statements on community life that achieved consensus were "aspirational and symmetrical, calling on both locals and foreigners to make effort". However, neighbourhood interactions were perceived to be superficial. On the other hand, the consensus on education and employment came through conditionality, particularly citizen priority in the case where qualifications were equal between locals and foreigners. Interestingly, both citizens and foreign participants endorsed citizen priority, especially when it was "framed as recognition of contribution rather than exclusion". Finally, only one statement on multiculturalism achieved consensus. Commenting on this finding, Mr Thomas said: "The question at stake is, is Singapore's cultural identity anchored after 60 years, or is it continuously inherently evolving?" In sum, the first hypothesis on the possibility of unanimous consensus was supported with nuances. The second hypothesis on deliberation-translated action was partially supported. While a Residents' Report and community project are being developed, the latter needs more funding support, said Mr Thomas.

He also noted that participants' attitudes changed after they had gone through the Consensus Conference. Based on polls conducted with participants before and after the conference, his team found that Singapore citizens became significantly more comfortable engaging with people from different backgrounds, while non-residents were significantly less certain their views were correct, after they had been exposed to new perspectives during the conference. He reported that "Participants expressed stronger beliefs that they have a say in what government does and their voices matter". Overall, more than nine in 10 participants reported finding the conference experience positive and meaningful. However, Mr Thomas acknowledged the key concerns that emerged from the experiment relating to the muted contributions of citizens, data accessibility and long-term foreign residents' feelings of being

“permanently temporary — wishing to sink roots but perceiving pathways to permanent residence as almost inaccessible”.

In view of the experiment findings, Mr Thomas’ team proposes three sets of recommendations. First, institutional attention can be committed to local-foreign integration. To this end, Mr Thomas suggested two approaches: either broadening the scope of current organisations like OnePeople.sg and the National Integration Council to include these engagements, or founding a specialised multiculturalism office to provide the dedicated resources and expertise needed for long-term programming. The second and third recommendations relate to public communications. Specifically, the government in its public communications could recognise both foreign and citizen contributions to Singapore. Further, policy language could frame citizens as stakeholders rather than “beneficiaries of government generosity”. Finally, data relevant to local-foreigner issues could be made more accessible on official channels.

In Mr Thomas’ concluding remarks, he commented that the experiment findings were both “heartening and cautionary”. He explained that ongoing work is necessary to address questions around identity even though common ground exists.

### Question-and-Answer Session

**Q:** Do Ms Yip and SMS Tan have reflections on the presentation or clarifying questions for Mr Thomas?

**A:** Ms Yip was intrigued by (a) the experiment’s finding that 23 out of 67 statements achieved consensus and (b) the high proportion of the conference audience polled by Mr Thomas who thought consensus was impossible. “So, it seems like we can, we have space to be more optimistic.” SMS Tan acknowledged the resource intensity of the Consensus Conference. He added that the Consensus Conference is not a replacement of or incompatible with the use of other methodologies such as surveys and dialogues.

**Q:** Inclusion is difficult. Smaller groups are often not able to include every minority groups — e.g., religion, abilities, socioeconomic status. How to include sensibly?

**A:** Mr Thomas commented that the use of basic English and structure of the Consensus Conference contributed to inclusion. Particularly, its multi-session nature enabled participants to gather perspectives from others for the subsequent sessions. He also highlighted the possibility to conduct Consensus Conference in vernacular languages. Ms Yip explained the Reach vs Richness framework, which suggested the trade-off between the number of people reached and data richness. She recommended employing a mix of the methodologies for balance. SMS Tan emphasised the importance to consider engagement strategies that “go to where people are”. He cited an example of going to *getai* (live boisterous, open-air stage performances) to reach the elderly groups.

**Q:** Most people self-censor when discussing sensitive topics for fear of social or professional consequences. How can spaces be created to foster safe and deep sharing?

**A:** Mr Thomas said that the Consensus Conference tapped emotions and lived experience, and the safeguards established helped participants to share openly. Ms Yip added the importance of psychosocial environment such as power dynamics and deploying trained facilitators conversant with group dynamics and strategies to encourage sharing. SMS Tan emphasised the importance of the engagement process. SMS Tan added, “I don’t think is a failure of the platform if at the end of the whole session, people say ‘I don’t agree with everything, what each other say’. And to me, it’s not a failure. It’s actually a part of the process.”

**Q:** What are your thoughts on the delicate balance in a multicultural society whereby we respect that people find their own tribe and concurrently not have practices that suggest one’s tribe is better than others?

**A:** Ms Yip commented, “We look for people who are similar to us. It’s the easy thing to do.” Conversely, it is more challenging to establish networks with people beyond one’s “tribe”. However, she encouraged people to do so. SMS Tan commented about Singapore’s extensive efforts in building shared spaces and experiences to unite people: “... social capital, like other financial capital, it compounds. So, it’s really about how to build that foundation and allow it to compound over generations”.

### **Parting Reflections**

Dr Lee invited the panellists to share their reflections before closing the session. Mr Thomas said “there’s something exceptionally special about Singapore. For us to find common ground where in many other countries are deeply polarised, divided, is something special.” Ms Yip reflected on the importance of curiosity in neutralising hostility against one another. SMS Tan concluded, “It’s about choosing connections over division...”.

### **AI Usage Declaration**

No AI tool was used in the writing of this report.

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