



**IPS Seminar on "One Foot In: An ‘Arts NMP’ on  
Politics and Activism in Influencing Cultural Policy"  
15 June 2011  
Opening Remarks by Arun Mahizhnan**

Arun Mahizhnan  
*IPS Deputy Director*

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming to our seminar “One Foot In: An ‘Arts NMP’ on Politics and Activism in Influencing Cultural Policy”.

This title is deliberate because it echoes what Audrey herself mentioned in 2009 as a foot in the door for the arts among decision makers and also reflects the tentative nature of this new and pioneering enterprise of the first “arts NMP” in Singapore. As many of you are aware, the role of the NMPs, from any domain, is already fraught with inherent contradictions. They are called representatives and yet they are really not because there is no proper process of election or selection by the respective constituencies themselves. Then there is the problem of how reflective the NMP’s views are of the entire domain. There is an even more fundamental problem: they are sitting in the same chamber as the properly elected and empowered MPs, many of whom the ruling party brings under the whip, preventing them from saying many things the NMPS dare say. In any case, we have more or less leant to live with the NMP scheme since it started in 1990 but the “arts NMP” is still a very new phenomenon.

To what extent does Audrey represent the arts community? To what extent does she represent it? To what extent is she an echo and to what extent is she her own voice? To what extent is she an advocate and to what extent is she an honest broker between the governors and the governed? Is she there to push each cause, win each battle or lose a few battles and win the war? How does she choose what she wants to speak for and what the art community wants her to voice? And how does the community itself know what it wants? There are many such questions that Audrey has to grapple with in her role as an NMP for the arts community.

So, Audrey’s experience and insights would be highly valuable for all of us to see how effective the “arts NMP” scheme has been in the past or could be in the future.

When Audrey was asked how she sees the position of an “arts NMP” before she was admitted into the Parliament, this is what she said in July 2009: This position has the potential to bring a more humanistic and alternative viewpoint to the present economic-dominated discourses and perspective adopted by the government and its agencies – not just with respect to the arts, but on areas beyond the arts.

She also felt that the public visibility of an “arts NMP” will inspire more people to take arts and culture seriously and take on leadership roles in the arts/creative sector. She hoped to give an alternative voice to make the arts scene even more vibrant.

It would be interesting to hear from Audrey how much of her hopes have been realised.

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