

Dialogue with IPS Corporate Associates, 14 July 2011: Ambassador Ong Keng Yong, Outgoing IPS Director

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At a Lunch Dialogue with IPS Corporate Associates on 14 July 2011, Ambassador Ong Keng Yong shared insights into the issues that have been significant to him during his term as Director of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS). He also formally introduced his successor at IPS, Mr Janadas Devan.

Ambassador Ong reminisced on the milestones marking his three year stint at IPS – the merger of IPS with the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and the fostering of a positive relationship with policy makers, based on IPS' role in facilitating policy discussions informed by academic perspectives. He had very much appreciated the show of support from Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong when he agreed to deliver the keynote speech at the IPS flagship Singapore Perspectives 2010 Conference last year to engage Singaporeans in debate about public policy challenges.



PM Lee with Ambassador Ong and IPS Researchers at the Singapore Perspectives 2010 Conference, 25 Jan 2010



During his tenure as Director, IPS launched a new series of surveys in 2009 – the Perception of Policies in Singapore or POPS Surveys – on issues of public interest such as the resilience of Singaporeans during the economic crisis. Ambassador Ong acknowledged the contribution of organisations like the Singapore Totalisator Board in funding these studies, as well as the financial support of IPS Corporate Associates which allowed the Institute to conduct its own research and publish its findings. The Corporate Associates Scheme had been initiated by his predecessor and current IPS Special Adviser Professor Tommy Koh, and Ambassador Ong noted that it had developed into an important and unique feature at IPS. Over the years, IPS' Corporate Associates have provided intellectual support and brought critical private sector perspectives to IPS discussions with policy makers and civil society groups, and their contributions have added tremendous value to the

reach of the Institute's research. Many Corporate Associates have also brought in local and international colleagues to exchange views and offer their perspectives on the research at IPS.

Ambassador Ong reflected that in the last three years, his role as the Director of a policy think-tank had led him to become a keen follower in an arena of public engagement previously unfamiliar to him – 'cyberspace' and the 'blogosphere'. Online commentaries and new media platforms had become significant in finding out what young Singaporeans thought of certain government policies. He observed that understanding new media as a means of engaging their views would be increasingly important for those in government and they would need to find additional ways of engaging the public.

As a former Secretary-General of ASEAN, Ambassador Ong fielded questions on his views on the future direction of ASEAN, given the complex nature of ASEAN's attempt to integrate its economies in line with the roadmap for the ASEAN Economic Community by 2015. Ambassador Ong acknowledged that one



pressing issue facing ASEAN was each member's ability to implement key economic integration measures within their domestic economies. As Ambassador Ong prepared to leave for his new posting as the High Commissioner of Singapore to Malaysia, he hoped that the business communities in both countries would take advantage of the strong and positive relations between both governments to develop more partnerships and new exchanges.

Mr Janadas Devan, the new Director of IPS, took the opportunity to highlight the issue of income inequality in Singapore. IPS would be doing new work on this topic. He noted that it had been a key issue in the recent general election in May 2011 and had been perceived as crucial factor in influencing the ruling party's vote share. Yet, income inequality was an immense challenge not only for Singapore, but for advanced economies around the world, given vast technological advancements and the great doubling of the global workforce, which had both placed enormous pressure on wages at the bottom, and stagnation of the incomes in the middle. Mr Devan noted that charting Singapore's strategy for future development and growth model involved not only policy makers, but views from the corporate sector, among others. Singapore's future would involve changes in its political and economic landscape, and the understanding of these changes had only just begun – IPS' role would be to remain as a platform for various groups in society to do so.

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