

Empowering Changes will Strengthen NS for Generations

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Standing in front of a life-sized statue of an infantry soldier carrying a Singapore Armed Forces flag a year ago, Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen made a pledge to listen to the concerns and wishes of national servicemen.

It was a fitting backdrop to the start of a year-long journey by the Committee to Strengthen National Service, which Dr Ng leads, to find ways to increase Singaporeans' motivation for national service and boost buy-in from the community and employers.

Not that commitment to the rite of passage was flagging, cautioned Dr Ng. An Institute of Policy Studies survey on NS had shown that 98 per cent of respondents supported NS and agreed it was necessary for the defence of the country. Rather, the review was more about how to sustain the commitment to NS among a new generation of servicemen.

From the raft of 30 recommendations announced yesterday, Dr Ng and his panel seem to have delivered on many fronts.

For the working NSmen, the committee is proposing to give them more time and leeway to train and prepare for their Individual Physical Proficiency Test, addressing their perennial grumbles of juggling work, family and their NS obligations. It is even prepared to ease restrictions on those who go overseas, requiring only those whose trips are longer than 14 days to notify the authorities.

Committee member Allan Lim did not mince words, calling these "pain points" of NS. Removing them will "create greater goodwill and spur more people to be more interested to serve", he noted.

Hearing the 20-man steering committee yesterday, one could not help but sense a change in the way the Mindef views and deals with its servicemen.

The "I know better" attitude has been replaced by a greater willingness to engage millennial soldiers who, in Dr Ng's words, were "born and bred in an affluent Singapore with no direct memories of our early struggles". This lot of digital natives are also more vocal and questioning, and so have to be trained and dealt with differently. As Dr Ng noted in his first interview as Defence Minister in 2011, it is a new generation that "really has to find its own teaching moments".

That is, perhaps, most apparent in the committee's suggestion to give servicemen more time and flexibility to carry out their physical fitness training. If a person is given more freedom to determine when and how he wants to train and achieve his goals, chances are he ends up more self-motivated.

This itself has an indirect effect on the nation's defence. As Second Defence Minister Chan Chun Sing puts it: "When our NSmen take ownership of their own fitness and operational readiness, that is the strongest deterrent message we can send to anyone."

In sifting through the myriad suggestions thrown up by some 40,000 participants in townhalls and focus group discussions, the committee passed on many popular and easy wins that would have more obviously sealed its place in history, like giving preferential admission to primary schools and increasing full-time national servicemen's allowances.

By choosing instead to initiate a more subtle shift towards empowering Singapore's NSmen and making them more responsible for themselves and their country, the committee has better strengthened the NS pillar for many generations to come.

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