

Envoy's 'happy takeaway' from IPS

Ong Keng Yong says he has gained better understanding of scholars, civil society groups

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VETERAN diplomat Ong Keng Yong says he has come away from his stint at the helm of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) with a better appreciation of academic scholars and the work that civil society groups undertake.

He also looks back on his three years at the think-tank from June 2008 with satisfaction at having increased the number of research fellows there.

There were just four senior and three junior research fellows when he took up the post as IPS director. It now has 17 senior and junior fellows.

Mr Ong, 57, relinquished his position yesterday and will take up his appointment as Singapore's next High Commissioner to Malaysia on July 18, replacing Mr T. Jasudasen, who will be posted to London.

Mr Ong is looking forward to going back full-time to the world of diplomacy: 'Since 1998 when I returned as High Commissioner to India, I have been doing different jobs... I have not been fully in a diplomatic job that I've been trained for, so I'm really quite excited about getting back into the job.'

Before joining the IPS, he spent almost 20 years in different positions in the Foreign Affairs Ministry and in diplomatic missions. These included a stint in India, where he was concurrently Singapore's Ambassador to Nepal; and serving as Singapore's non-resident Ambassador to Iran.

Mr Ong was also press secretary to then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong from 1998 to 2002, chief executive of the People's Association from 1999 to 2002, and Asean secretary-general from January 2003 to January 2008.

He said that when he joined the IPS, which is part of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, he was not used to dealing with academics and working within academia. But that has changed.

'The three years in IPS allowed me to get to know Singapore academics. I also got to know them better as friends and to understand what drives them to do research, what motivates them to put their points of view across... That would be my happy takeaway from my time at IPS.'

Another takeaway: engaging civil society and non-government groups. 'One function of IPS is to reach out to all stakeholders on issues. I was able to meet up with these different individuals and groups, understand their concerns.

'They are not troublemakers or people with an intention to cause discord or create confusion. Rather, they sincerely believe in what they say. We need to engage them and deliberate on the issues to have a better appreciation of each other's standpoints,' he said, adding that he made a lot of friends in the non-government sector as a result of his IPS days.

Mr Ong, who remained an Ambassador-at-Large during his IPS stint, also paid tribute to his team at the IPS. Their efficiency meant that he could leave them to implement guidelines he issued when he needed to travel overseas on ambassadorial duties.

He will be succeeded at the IPS by Mr Janadas Devan, who is currently an associate editor at The Straits Times and will retain his role at the newspaper even as he takes on his new post at the think-tank. Mr Devan said he will be dividing his time 50:50 between the two organisations.

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