

Framing THE Singapore conversation

The country is about to embark on a public engagement exercise of unprecedented scale and scope. At the helm of Our Singapore Conversation are the rising stars in Cabinet. They will come face to face with thousands of citizens of diverse interests and expectations. The stakes are high. How is the start-up shaping up?

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Against the backdrop of a serene Bishan-Ang Mo Kio Park, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's National Day message last month was building up to something big.

After a bruising general election, a transformed parliamentary landscape and a slew of policy changes, Mr Lee wanted the country to take a breather - and go back to basics.

"We must ask ourselves some fundamental questions," he said. "What future do we see for Singapore? What kind of home do we want for our children? I believe all of us want to be proud to be Singaporeans, and to live in a successful country that meets our aspirations. What does this mean?"

To find out, he announced, a committee of younger ministers led by Education Minister Heng Swee Keat would be formed.

For some, the committee's sweeping mandate was an exciting opportunity to help shape the country's future.

Nanyang Technological University accountancy student Stanley Chia, 25, is one of the "ordinary Singaporeans" on the new committee and he is raring to go. "I have been gathering feedback from my classmates and friends and can't wait to share it with the ministers."

For others, the announcement of yet another engagement exercise landed with a thud.

"I cannot think of any other country in the world that forms as many committees," lamented former Nominated MP Viswa Sadasivan, who has sat on quite a few himself. "But there's the fundamental economic principle of diminishing marginal utility. We are seeing significant diminishing marginal utility of national committees."

Diminishing utility?

Mr Heng's committee is the third in 15 years to relook broad social policy, and to grapple with issues of identity, aspiration and national values.

What perhaps prompts scepticism is that its direct forebears - Singapore 21 in 1998, and the Remaking Singapore Committee (RSC) in 2002 - did not leave the sort of mark that the Government's economic committees are known for.

The Economic Restructuring Committee (ERC) of 2002, for example, ushered in a new tax structure, a retreat of government-linked enterprises so as not to crowd out the private sector, and even the casinos.

Its social counterpart, the RSC, made many recommendations that have been slowly realised over the last decade, like instituting a five-day work week, establishing a school for the arts, and the ceasing of prior vetting of performance scripts.

But initial attention, fairly or not, lingered more on what the Government outrightly rejected from its report. No, it would not let children pick which second language to study. No, it would not define OB markers for political discussion. No, it would not offer religious education in schools.

As for the Singapore 21 exercise, the nation's virginal foray into mass engagement, its report swiftly faded from view as the country turned its attention to a deep economic recession brought about by the Asian financial crisis.

As Ang Mo Kio GRC MP Inderjit Singh, who sat on both Singapore 21 and the ERC, sums up: "The Prime Minister didn't even bother responding to the Singapore 21 report in Parliament."

But Mr Heng, in his first statement on the new committee, made clear that he saw little connection with what had come before. For one thing, he avoided the term "committee" entirely, preferring "team", to describe the 26 men and women who will spearhead the process with him. He introduced a new phrase that will loom large in public consciousness for at least the next year. What he wanted to start, he said, was a "national conversation".

There are many aspects of the shape and scale of the exercise - officially termed Our Singapore Conversation (OSC) - that are indeed unprecedented.

It will be larger than ever before: almost 5,000 Singaporeans will be invited to focus group sessions, with thousands more engaged through new media. And that will just be in Phase 1, as citizens are asked, in small groups across 30 sessions, to ponder three questions in an open-ended, creative manner:

- * What matters most to us?
- * What are the values we hold in common?
- * How can we work together to meet the challenges of the future?

It will also be unstructured, and strenuously "ground-up". Mr Heng wants to form sub-committees only in Phase 2, and these will be based on the themes that emerge from Phase 1.

This is in stark contrast to the Singapore 21 exercise, where five sub-committees each pondered a given "dilemma" - with trade-offs already baked in - such as "less stressful life versus retaining the drive," and "consultation and consensus versus decisiveness and quick action".

Unlike the previous exercises where political and community leaders engaged with citizens through a question-and-answer dialogue format, the OSC will see ministers even take on the roles of "facilitators" to the small group discussions in Phase 1.

Trained facilitators, some of whom will be civil servants, will shepherd each small group. But, at least one high-level member of the committee will be present at each focus group session, which will range in size from 50 to 150 people. When the participants break into small groups to discuss the three questions, the ministers may rove around, or even sit down with a group to facilitate and partake in the conversation.

And, in a move that has garnered the most attention, if not all positive, the OSC is more inclusive than ever before. The 26-man-strong committee or "team" has, among others, a taxi driver, a polytechnic student, and a Mandarin-speaking entertainer.

These choices have already been labelled as "token" by some online commentators - a sign, perhaps, of a major break with the past that Mr Heng's committee must grapple with.

The OSC exercise will take place against the backdrop of new and alternative media in full, fiesty bloom - what Minister for the Environment and Water Resources Vivian Balakrishnan, who headed the RSC exercise, calls "cyncicism amplified".

Already, criticism has mounted over the lack of opposition politicians on the committee, and the preponderance of People's Action Party (PAP) ones. Asked about this, Mr Heng said that the picking of committee members was "not a partisan exercise", and that opposition politicians' views would be welcome during the OSC process.

In the view of Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh, such disagreement need not be a roadblock for either side. "For those who do not wish to legitimate the process, it is well within their right to sit it out, or even set up their alternative platforms to do the same in a different way, with different groups.

"The outcomes will be different, and will in all fairness be treated differently than the official National Conversation," she adds. "But if they accept that, then they could go right ahead and run their own gig."

Not abattoir, but training ground

There is also disagreement over how the OSC exercise should be assessed.

The committee's ambition has been matched by outsized expectations from observers and the public, to the point where both PM Lee and Mr Heng, before the whole OSC committee even meets for the first time today, have felt the need to talk things down.

Mr Heng told reporters two weeks ago that the national conversation is not a "culling exercise" of sacred cows; it will seek instead to "reaffirm, recalibrate and refresh" national values and policies.

PM Lee also sought, a week later, to focus minds on the process, rather than the outcome: "We leave no stone unturned," he said. "But some stones, after we look at them, the original place was quite nice and we put them back."

Dr Balakrishnan, too, cautions against a "book-keeping exercise" of "how many recommendations did you get the Government to accept or how discontinuous was the change, or how many sacred cows were killed?"

The real value of such public engagement exercises, he argues, is in the space where everyone can come together to express their views, and then for a collective, coherent and consistent framework of "values, ideas and plans" to emerge: "which hopefully the majority of your population can accept and back".

To forge an overriding consensus on values that can stand above day-to-day political disagreement over discrete issues is a key priority for the OSC committee.

Equally essential to the Government, note observers, is the engagement exercise as a mechanism to profile - and baptise - its new generation of political leaders.

These mass exercises have always been headed by rising stars at the start of their political careers: the Singapore 21 committee was spearheaded by Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean and included Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts and Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs Yaacob Ibrahim and former Second Minister for Transport and Finance Lim Hwee Hua.

The RSC was headed by Dr Balakrishnan, and included Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen and Health Minister Gan Kim Yong.

With Mr Heng, Acting Minister for Manpower Tan Chuan-Jin, Acting Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports Chan Chun Sing, Senior Minister of State for Education and Information, Communications and the Arts Lawrence Wong, and soon- to-be Senior Minister of State for Law and Education Indranee Rajah, the OSC committee includes the nucleus of the PAP Government's fourth-generation leadership.

Explains Dr Koh: "It is a way to give them full frontal exposure to public opinion, on not just the minutiae of public policy but points of principle and on what people value as citizens and in government."

It is also a "ready-made vehicle to let the new leaders meet the people", says National University of Singapore associate professor of law and playwright Eleanor Wong, who was on the RSC. "It'll help them figure out their own styles in the process and also helps the party leadership see who among the younger generation is good at reaching out and engaging."

"It's not a bad way to train them," she adds. "It's better than their spending the equivalent time sitting in a little room talking to one another."

The pace of change

Many observers believe that there must be at least some major policy changes to emerge from the OSC exercise for it to satisfy the public.

"I'm all for public engagement as long as it's open-minded and results in solid outcomes. If in the end it's just tweaking around the edges, airy-fairy statements like 'Singaporeans want a harmonious society', then it will lead to deepened cynicism," warns Mr Viswa. "People will, in the end, measure this based on concrete improvements to their lives."

Dr Balakrishnan argues that improvements will be the end result, as they were with Remaking Singapore, even if the changes do not occur straightaway - hence diluting their connection in people's minds. He points to how some of the RSC's recommendations, like giving the dependants of female civil servants the same medical benefits as those of males, are now so entrenched as to be unremarkable.

"Our efforts did not come across at that point of time as a sudden discontinuity from the status quo. But I think it encapsulated ideas, trends and an evolution of society that has been very evident in the last decade," he says.

"To me, that's a source of quiet satisfaction. It has made a difference in a quiet and effective way, and the fact is that we almost don't notice it. That's probably the way we hope change will evolve in Singapore."

In some instances, change has come about due to forces outside the scope of the committees' work. Both the Singapore 21 and RSC reports contained the recommendation, rejected by the Government twice, to "define political OB markers". This was because of the Government's tendency then to caution critics harshly that they should enter politics if they wanted to cross these markers in everyday discourse.

Now, as Holland-Bukit Timah GRC MP Liang Eng Hwa, notes, "recommendations have been overtaken by events". "People say whatever they want. It shows how fast Singapore has moved."

That rapid pace of change is, to Assoc Prof Wong, reason to consider "regularising" such exercises, and carrying one out every decade or so.

"Every mature country can benefit from a regular rethink of where it stands, a time it can take a step back and look at the fundamentals afresh," she says. "The Government might be doing itself a disservice to set it up as if this new committee will be more amazing and earth-shaking than anything that came before. Rather, let's treat it as something valuable that's just part of our political landscape."

Credit should be given to the Government for even sitting down at the table and opening the door wide, she adds, regardless of how disappointed some may be that their pet issues are not, in the end, addressed.

Recalling her time on the RSC, she says: "When Vivian called me up and asked are you prepared to serve? Funnily enough, for all my criticism of the Government, the moment he asked, I said yes. At the end of the day, we love this country, we need to move in good faith - because the alternative is worse."