

'New model of governance needed' for Singapore to thrive

Charissa Yong

The Straits Times, 4 May 2017

UNLIKE the top-down approach taken in the past, Singapore's future success hinges on the Government working well with businesses and society, said former head of the civil service Peter Ho yesterday.

"The view that 'the Government knows best'... is increasingly challenged in today's world, in which citizens and businesses can easily gain access to much of the information that governments used to monopolise in the past," he noted.

Given the new situation and other changes in the environment, Mr Ho argued that a new model of governance is needed.

He made the point in his third lecture as a Institute of Policy Studies' S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore, a position that requires fellows to give their ideas on public policy and governance in a series of lectures.

Singapore is already a leader in public policy, so it is no longer enough for policymakers to simply copy and adapt a model of governance from elsewhere, he said.

"For many of the emergent issues that we have to deal with, Singapore will have to evolve its own strategies and approaches."

He boiled down the reason for a new governance model to three factors.

One, the unfavourable conditions at Singapore's birth continue today, despite its success as a sovereign city-state.

"Our success in overcoming them may well have masked the deep challenges that remain, and remain mostly undiminished. This is the paradox of Singapore," said Mr Ho, a senior adviser at the think-tank called Centre for Strategic Futures.

These include Singapore's small size, making it vulnerable to climate change and rising seas, and its water scarcity, which not many Singaporeans grasp fully, he said.

Even Singapore's status as the world's second busiest container port is not secure, he told an audience of about 200 officials and students at the National University of Singapore.

The country is constantly being put to the test by regional competitors or technological advances like 3D printing, which will reduce the need to move goods.

Two, the world is complex and fast-changing, a challenging state addressed by Mr Ho in his previous two lectures.

This complexity means that trade-offs when deciding on public policies are much more difficult to make, because each option may lead to unintended consequences.

Three, citizens and businesses today have far higher expectations of the Government than before.

One reason is that after people's basic needs of food and housing are met, they demand that their more complex needs, like being empowered to reach their full potential, be addressed, he said, referring to Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Another reason is that today's young adults, who are more educated, have known only the affluence and success of Singapore.

"What persuaded their parents and grandparents will not wash with the third generation," Mr Ho said, adding that fresh arguments and new ways are needed to communicate with this generation.

The Government can design better policies by looking at issues from the citizens' perspective, compared to using "the usual top-down approach", he added.

To its credit, the Government has found ways to engage the private sector and is starting to take engaging people seriously, he said during the question-and-answer session.

Mr Ho pointed to how the Government consults the business community in its wide-ranging economic reviews, and spent a year listening to people in its 2013 Our Singapore Conversation feedback drive.

But engaging people early is important, he said.

It is not as if they do not understand that decisions have to be made and which may not please everyone, he added.

"What they want is to be involved in the process, and it means the Government must engage early, not late in the day."