

Putting the heartland in think-tanks

Institute of Policy Studies chief wants his researchers to canvass a wider variety of views

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'BY BEING intellectual, you convey a certain snobbery.'

This worry sounds peculiar, coming from the director of one of the oldest, most well-established think-tanks in Singapore.

But there is nothing typical about Mr Ong Keng Yong, the recently installed head of the Institute of Policy Studies, which was set up in 1987 to focus on domestic policy research.

The 55-year-old career civil servant, who before his current post oversaw the institutionalisation of Asean and the modernisation of the People's Association, readily confesses that he is 'not the academic type'.

He finds debating with intellectuals more taxing than with diplomats or policy-makers.

'I don't feel happy at all,' he says of his current role, which he says he took on because he never turns down postings.

Since his appointment last July, he has tasked his 20 IPS colleagues with reaching out and canvassing views beyond the 'noisy sectors'.

The institute, he worries, 'seems to be always pushing the same few points advocated by the middle-class, the English-speaking academics and all that'.

He is candid enough to admit that his colleagues disagree there is such a shortcoming in the first place, but he maintains: 'I don't get enough confidence that some of the assertions about issues in Singapore reflect a multi-segment position.'

'We tend to take the views of academics - maybe they have done their homework, but let's validate that with polling or survey, or by talking to more people out in the various grassroots bodies and communities.'

'I am not convinced that we have done enough to bring in the opinions of the heartlanders and the non-English-speakers.'

He adds that it is important for intellectuals to come across as appreciating the sensitivity and concerns of all segments of society.

The IPS was absorbed into the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy last year amid debate about whether it could retain its independence.

Since its inception 22 years ago, it has often produced controversial studies - on town councils, the elected presidency and Singapore's fertility policy, among other topics.

Mr Ong juggles the IPS job with another as Singapore's Ambassador-At-Large.

He came on board four years after long-time IPS director Tommy Koh vacated the post to become its chairman.

So far, he says, the LKY School has not interfered with IPS' work. 'Of course if we go down the road and do things which excite them in not a very positive way, they might get pressured to butt into our research areas more frequently.'

He is clear though, that the IPS 'should not be the rabble-rouser'.

'We should not be firing at a particular issue or policy without a strong basis. We have to act responsibly. The institute's work should revolve around our idea of balance.'

For example, he says doing research on why homosexual sex should be decriminalised would be 'a bit too sensational for us'. 'But that doesn't mean that we should not discuss this issue in a responsible, mature way,' he adds.

The IPS, he observes, has over the years gained a reputation for giving an alternative take on Singapore's government policies. 'Maybe in this process we might have given the impression that we are evolving into an influential non-establishment channel and forum.'

'What I want to do, now that we are part of the LKY School, is to try to develop some of these ideas which IPS and other interested parties have put forward in a more systematic, responsible way.'

He sees his role as a 'transition manager', getting the IPS to help Singaporeans understand policies a bit more and in the process remove a perceived elitist image, just as he tried to improve governance within Asean and bring the PA up to date with the 21st century.

The relationship between Singapore's academics and its authorities has been difficult in the past, he notes. 'Academics look at things in clinical terms...the Government and authorities have to manage problems in multiracial Singapore in a way which requires lots of balance.'

Academics, he says, 'don't like to be talked down to' and have felt that their views are shunted aside. He cites writer Catherine Lim's 1994 political commentary, in which she said that Singaporeans do not have much affection for the Government. It earned her a sharp rebuke from then-prime minister Goh Chok Tong and a challenge for her to enter politics.

'Even if the people in charge did not fully agree with the academic's research or thesis, there was no need for acrimony or public confrontation,' he says. 'The previous approach by some of our agencies has been taken to mean that there is not enough respect given to academics. Hopefully this will change as we move along.'

But he admits he dreads the monotony of the academic reading he needs to do in order to engage researchers at the IPS, though, of late, he says he has found a niche in giving his colleagues the 'bureaucrat's input' on their ideas.

This means explaining to a researcher - from the policy-makers' perspective - how and why a policy came into place, and the many considerations that had to be factored in. Some colleagues have called him 'a typical bureaucrat', whereas others have praised him for being action-oriented.

'Hopefully as time passes, I will be more happy with my role here.'

In many ways, the IPS is unlike other think-tanks around the world, he says. 'Many think-tanks say 'We are independent' when they may not be, or they say 'We are government' and go about doing things in a way which does not get enough support from intellectuals.'

'We try to be honest and say: 'Yes, we are close to the Government, but we are not part of the Government'.'

For over 22 years, he says, the IPS has provided a platform for people to study policy, ventilate views, test ideas, pick up new knowledge. 'But now we are hoping to go beyond that and also

do a bit of 'textbook-writing'.'

By 'textbook-writing', he means getting researchers to produce public policy case studies on specific schemes - like the introduction of hawker centres to improve public hygiene, or the introduction of carpark coupons - for use in post-graduate or undergraduate classrooms.

'I am trying to make things a bit more practical...we should try to translate some of these rather abstract policy issues into a more digestible package for people to appreciate the decision-making process.'

But even as he tries to get IPS to diversify its choice of opinion-makers, he hopes that civil servants would speak up more and engage academics more during conferences and seminars.

'The only thing I wish they would do - I know they come to listen and maybe trawl for ideas - is to speak up and ask questions. They sometimes come with a concern that if they speak, they might be put in a spot to explain government policy.'

'They would generally be silent, nodding their heads, making some hand signal or facial expression that says they don't agree with certain things.'

In the same vein, he feels public opinion polls should be conducted more frequently to get Singaporeans into the habit of thinking about and expressing themselves on issues. This process would also expose them to views that might otherwise not have been surfaced.

Arguably the IPS' best-known poll in recent years was the one conducted after the General Election in 2006. It found that Singaporeans valued a fair government over bread-and-butter issues, which ran counter to views articulated by ruling politicians here.

The results drew much debate, even from a minister, who remained unconvinced that it was a true picture. The IPS researchers involved had to defend their findings robustly.

In their defence, Mr Ong says: 'This was a survey...There was no ulterior motive beyond intellectual inquiry.'

'If you think that we have failed to give you the right sampling, you are entitled to your view...If you are used to a certain picture, when someone gives you some variation of the picture, it can be unsettling.'

The whole idea of the exercise is to provide a perspective on the issue. 'If you don't think this is correct, then you don't have to do anything,' he says. 'If you think that there is a merit in looking into some of these reasons for the vote, then it's good. After all, we are serving Singaporeans.'

But he feels Singaporeans need to be a bit more mature in their approach to surveys, which are a regular affair in most developed countries.

'Singaporeans tend to be more reticent and can't be bothered to do surveys. But as we become more sophisticated and globalised, we have to realise that in some cases a snap survey may not be a bad thing,' he says.

Asked if there is anything that worries him about Singapore these days, he says: 'It seems the more we are educated, the less tolerant we have become of other people's opinions and views...We have become more and more insistent that whatever we want should carry the day.'

We've become very self-centred.

'Every developed city in the world has self-centred people...Here in Singapore this self-centredness has become more acute because we are living in a very small space. There is this feeling that if I don't get things my way, I am not going to be as successful and as important.'

This problem, he stresses, is not a mundane issue. 'It's about how Singaporeans will be defined, and how we can be accepted by people around us and people around the world.'

'If we are always so self-centred, so opinionated about our individual positions, then we become ugly Singaporeans that people dislike.'

Singaporeans, he says, should speak up more and engage each other more, to get acquainted with the many angles of an issue.

'The best thing to do, is to remember that every coin has two sides.'