

More leadership needed for better governance: Lawrence Wong

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The ability to look beyond the short-term has been crucial to the success of many of Singapore's policies, but it has become more difficult for leaders to take the long-term view now, said Acting Culture, Community and Youth Minister Lawrence Wong yesterday.

In addition to the Government's policies and actions being subjected to "daily barracking", the "daily incessant round of the 24-hour news cycle, its noise amplified by the social media, will make governance more difficult here as it has elsewhere", said Mr Wong.

He was speaking at the Singapore Perspectives 2013 conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

Mr Wong said better governance in Singapore would therefore call for more leadership so as to retain the long-term perspective and make difficult decisions that will yield long-term benefits.

This, he added, should come alongside an improved system of meritocracy, an active citizenry and a vibrant civic society, and a better understanding of the interdependencies between the state and markets.

Good governance, however, also needs a "diversity of ideas and competing options", said IPS Senior Research Fellow Donald Low, who was also on the panel with Mr Wong.

Pointing to top academic institutions that do not immediately hire their doctoral graduates, in a move to ensure "cognitive diversity", Mr Low disagreed with having "a system that is critically dependent on a similar group of people, no matter how bright they may be".

Mr Low - a former high flying civil servant - suggested that the Government send bureaucrats to academic institutions to expose them to more ideas, noting that senior civil servants "don't have enough exposure".

He added: "In almost all my conversations with senior policy makers I am struck by how confident, almost to the point of smugness ... and they betray no signs of uncertainty, of doubt. .. What comes across to me is confidence, and I think that confidence worries me sometimes."

He called for institutions supporting diversity and dissent, and for the Government to provide citizens and researchers with more access to information. Greater diversity, he said, would "bolster trust in our system of governance and enhances Government's credibility".

Adding that he is “less worried” about the dangers of political polarisation, than he is of the “effects of incumbency, inertia of the status quo and the tyranny of ideas”, Mr Low urged policy experimentation and for policies to be empirically measured.

Agreeing, Mr Wong said that moving forward, governance might have to involve risks in the form of local experiments of policy options, so as to test new ideas before implementing policies nationally.