

Leon Perera: We should never trust blindly in any government or institution

Anna Maria Romero

The Independent Singapore, 25 January 2022

“Our laws should never give more and more powers to the Government to the extent of narrowing the space for public discourse. Crippling the development of active citizenry and civil society is not sensible, especially when the Government itself likes to trumpet the fact that our public is more educated than ever.” — Leon Perera

Singapore — Workers’ Party Member of Parliament Leon Perera (Aljunied GRC) pointed out that while Health Minister Ong Ye Kung recently echoed a phrase WP leader Pritam Singh famously coined, Mr Ong seems to have failed “to recognise the original intent of that phrase — that ‘ownself check ownself’ is never sufficient.”

Underlining the importance of checks on governmental power, he wrote in a Jan 22 Facebook post that we “should never trust blindly in any government or institution.”

At the Singapore Perspectives 2022 on Jan 13, the Health Minister opined, “People can say ‘ownself check ownself’, but I see it always as a virtue — if ownself cannot check ownself, you’re in big trouble.”

Mr Perera agreed that “checking one’s own house is a basic need for good governance” but added that “we can never ever fully check ourselves,” with opposition parties depending on “the goodwill of other democratic institutions like civil society, independent media outlets and active citizens to coalesce a good check on the Government.”

He wrote this in relation to the debate in Parliament on the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act (FICA), which passed on Oct 4, 2021, after a ten-hour debate.

Eleven MPs from the Workers’ Party and Progress Singapore Party objected to the passing of the bill, and two Nominated MPs abstained from the vote.

Several WP MPs raised objections to the Bill when it was proposed, including Mr Perera, who had raised the possibility of “elite capture.”

“What if the Minister for Home Affairs – which FICA vests extensive powers in – is himself a subject of foreign interference? After all, ministers meet CEOs of foreign companies, ambassadors and other lobbyists as part of their jobs,” Mr Perera wrote in his post.

As a safeguard, the WP proposed the establishment of an Ombudsman to be “an independent avenue of redress for ordinary citizens who want to lodge complaints against the government.”

But Mr Perera pointed out that Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam said that in western democracies that have institutions akin to the Ombudsman “do not necessarily have higher trust levels in government.”

However, Mr Perera countered this, writing, “But trust levels in government have complex causes in each country. It would be overly simplistic to attribute it to a single cause, a point which he acknowledged carried ‘a kernel of truth’.”

AND WHILE THE MINISTER ADDED THAT TRUST LEVELS IN THE GOVERNMENT ARE HIGH AT PRESENT, MR PERERA TOOK THIS WITH A NOTE OF CAUTION, WRITING THAT “SHOULD NEVER TRUST BLINDLY IN ANY GOVERNMENT OR INSTITUTION.”

He added, “We should never design our political system on the assumption that things will be the way they are today, but rather on the assumption that things may go wrong.

Our laws should never give more and more powers to the Government to the extent of narrowing the space for public discourse. Crippling the development of active citizenry and civil society is not sensible, especially when the Government itself likes to trumpet the fact that our public is more educated than ever.”