

Five Points for Peter Ho, Former Head of Civil Service

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WE'LL all be hearing more from Mr Peter Ho, the former head of Civil Service, because he's been picked to give the Institute of Policy Studies series of lectures. TODAY ran an interview with him on aspects of the civil service. Perhaps, he could expand on some points he made in his interview when he gives his lectures.

1. Mr Ho said that increasing complexity of policies and higher order needs of the populace means coming up with new ways, such as more risk management, to solve problems.

"It's not that traditional tools are no longer important; tools like cost-benefit analysis are still relevant. But cost-benefit analysis in a complex environment, in and of itself, may not provide you with the complete answer. Cost-benefit analysis is quite linear, and traditional tools don't help you get your arms completely around complex problems."

(What traditional tools are less important then? Can he cite instances when the solution did not address the problem because traditional tools were used? Was there a moment of epiphany for him?)

2. We don't know when the interview was conducted, whether before or after the Prime Minister said that he didn't want to be surrounded by naysayers. But clearly, he agrees that the rules-bound culture has to change, going by his message to the younger generation of civil servants.

"Your job is to find ways to improve Singapore's position and the lot of Singaporeans in a period of accelerating change and uncertainty. Of course, you're not going to be criticised for following the rules, but if you want to lift the quality of your policies and plans, and raise the level of good governance practised in Singapore, then it cannot be just about saying: "I followed the rules." Instead, it should be that "I tried to make things better." The basic misconception some younger civil servants may have is that what worked well in the past will be what propels you into the future successfully. Our civil servants must be able to keep up with the pace of change. You have to ask yourself if the rules, plans and policies still serve the purpose for which they were designed, or if we need to change them in order to do things better. "

(There's no point speaking in generalities. Can he enlighten with examples when sticking to the rules is to the detriment of policy outcomes? Or when rules work against the desire of the public service to be emphatic or to "have a heart". Can he also tell what rules have been changed because they are no longer relevant. Would policies on single mothers be one of them?)

3. Mr Ho talked about the need to be bold which is more difficult now because the basics have been achieved and Singapore is now "competing at the top".

"Today, of course, you still want that spark — that ability to think boldly about the future. But the big challenge now is, how much risk are you prepared to take? These are serious risks because

we've achieved so much, that a bad miscalculation can mean losing it all. The stakes are much higher."

(Can he give examples of what areas require bold but risky changes? Would the report of the Committee of the Future Economy or the reserved Presidential Election be among them? If so, what are the risks involved? Also, the general perception is the G prefers to make "tweaks" rather than take bold steps – or is this the wrong perception?)

4. Mr Ho talks about how many ingredients go into making a judgment call.

"...every major decision and every major policy are not an exercise to find the right answers. They are always an exercise in making the right judgment — not a hard right or hard wrong — but a balanced one that serves the best interests of the majority and the country. You cannot make everybody happy. Also, judgments always have to be revisited now and then — to go back to my point that things are changing. What seems to be sensible now may in a few years' time no longer be sensible. You have to be prepared to constantly change."

(Again, examples are needed. But there's another point to consider: The public service shouldn't think that a change is an acknowledgment of a mistake and therefore paper over the "change" as something that is a natural follow through of the old policy. When policies make a sharp turn, the people must be brought on board in understanding the changed circumstances or even objectives. Would he consider that enough explanation was given for the sudden announcement of the increase in the water price? Could Hong Kong's seizure of the Singapore's Terrexes be better explained to the people as an example of the changed geopolitical realities that Singapore faces?)

5. This wasn't touched upon but hopefully, Mr Ho will pick up the subject in one of his lectures. The civil service has always been accused of "group think" with its top echelons being a closed circle of like-minded individuals. That so many top civil servants cross into the political sphere doesn't add to people's confidence that radical or bold ideas can surface from the G. One example is how the Committee for the Future Economy is stuffed with Old Economy members. Singapore's Establishment seems to be a closed rank of people who went to the same schools and move in the same circles with very few gaps allowing for "mavericks". Please do not use the sole example of Mr Philip Yeo. He's just one man.