

Peter Ho lectures: Of elephants in the room that are black

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MR PETER Ho isn't like Mr Ho Kwon Ping, the entrepreneur who threw a couple of grenades when he was the first to [take](#) on the S R Nathan lectures. Nor is he like Mr Bilahari Kausikan, the veteran diplomat who [made](#) no bones about what he thought about soft-headed approaches in diplomacy. Mr Ho, the former head of the Civil Service who gave his fourth and final [lecture](#) yesterday, is gentle and scholarly. His lectures can also be described as an attempt to get people to understand that...

- a. The world is moving is so fast that it is well-nigh impossible to predict problems.
- b. Today's problems are so complex and intertwined that new approaches which encompass the big picture are needed to solve them – and even then, not everyone will be happy.
- c. Singapore needs a new, broader mindset that goes beyond the traditional idea of a national identity bounded by natural borders if it wants to prosper.

It is in his fourth and final lecture that Mr Ho makes his recommendations for the future. The first three are a lead-up to his point about not letting Singapore's constraints get us down. The above points probably over-summarise his lectures, which were extremely scholarly and delved deep into how to develop a mindset to deal with the unexpected.

So here is a selection of quotes that struck me, as well as my one cent worth of thoughts.

Besides Black Swans, he talked about Black Elephants

"The [black elephant](#) is a problem that is actually visible to everyone, but no one wants to deal with it, and so they pretend it is not there. When it blows up as a problem, we all feign surprise and shock, behaving as if it were a black swan," he said, giving the example of how the British establishment didn't think that Brexit could happen and was caught flat-footed when it did.

Nope, he didn't give a Singapore example of a Black Elephant which is cross between the black swan and the proverbial elephant in the room. Perhaps, the swelling of the foreign population in Singapore in the late 2000s could well be one of them. It needed an [election](#) and a [backlash](#) over the White Paper on Population to get the G to rethink its foreign manpower policies. As for a Black Swan event, there's the 2003 [Sars](#) crisis which Singapore responded to magnificently with a Whole-of-Government (WOG) approach. See next point.

He talked about a WOG approach to coming up with solutions

"But while Whole-of-Government may be an imperative for dealing with wicked problems, it is not easily achieved. Governments, like any large hierarchy, are organised into vertical silos. For Whole-of-Government to work, these vertical silos need to be broken down, so that information can flow horizontally to reach other agencies.

“It requires not just a lot of effort but also a real change of culture to surmount this instinct to operate within silos, in order to make Whole-of-Government work properly. Often, the leader must nag his people to remind them that the Whole-of-Government imperative takes precedence over narrow sectoral interests and perspectives.”

Nope, he didn't give any examples of difficulty. Rather, he gave examples of how the G was already taking this approach, which includes establishing institutions which work in the WOG way, such as the National Security and Coordination Secretariat and more recently, the Smart Nation & Digital Government Group.

He talked about the difficulties of challenging the official view

“But even if they try to do that, it is not always easy for the planner or policy-maker to challenge the official future, especially when that future is consistent with an organisation's biases and preconceptions. Those who articulate a radically different future are at danger of being branded as subversive or lacking a sense of reality. So they will have a real incentive to make their scenarios more palatable for their audiences. But in so doing, they also inadvertently reduce the impetus for the organisation to confront uncomfortable alternative futures and to prepare itself for them.”

Maybe the paragraphs above reflect his thinking about the paucity of [naysayers](#) and the dangers of groupthink, which was a hot topic recently. Note, however, he is taking an organic approach – that all big hierarchical institutions have the same problems.

He talked about mavericks

“Some will argue that leaders should be more tolerant of mavericks. My response to this is “Yes, but only up to a point.” A maverick is a maverick only if he is fighting the establishment. If he believes enough in his ideas, he ought to have the courage and conviction of his beliefs to push them, even against resistance. If he gives up the moment he runs into some opposition or official rebuff, then in my book, he is not a maverick. I think this is a sound approach. It is essentially a Darwinian process in which only those who have thought through their ideas, and are prepared to stand up and defend them, deserve the chance of a second hearing. Some mavericks will survive.”

This was in his [second](#) lecture, delivered on April 19. So it wasn't directed at a certain someone who wrote an unfortunate Facebook post.

He referred to the blame culture

“When things go wrong, as they often do, how do we respond? Do we just look for someone to blame, or do we work to solve the problem? A blame-seeking culture can be both destructive as well as unproductive. It might satisfy a human impulse to hold someone accountable. But it certainly does not solve the problem.”

So decision-making is an imperfect process. There's so little time to come up with a solution, which can't please everyone anyway. But surely holding someone accountable is not just a

human impulse but also the right thing to do, just as we reward the meritorious? It is part of the process of transparency, which he didn't touch on.

He said that Singapore can be more than a little red dot on the atlas.

"The central question that is posed in this evening's lecture is whether Singapore is merely a price-taker, or whether it has the ability to influence and alter the factors that shape the future?"

"A thread running through all these four lectures – and this evening's in particular – is a hopeful view that even small city-states can influence, shape, and even create, not just markets, but also their operating environment. It is a belief in this view that hope can be redeemed for even a little red dot like Singapore."

This was from his final lecture where he referred to small countries like Estonia and Denmark which envision e-nations in their future. But that is the subject of another column.