

No comment, no comment

Private views on public policies? Civil servants still can't air them in public

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ANY civil servants present?

If so, you can't join in the public discussion.

Sorry, rules are rules.

You have to send your personal views on government policy through the proper channels, please.

This is what you might hear at a public forum, as the Government is not changing the long-standing rule requiring civil servants to express views only through a ministry's internal feedback channel.

Let them speak, urged the Advisory Council on the Impact of New Media on Society (Aims) in its final report released last month.

Not possible, replied the Government yesterday.

DrLee Boon Yang, Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts (Mica), said the Government has decided to retain the present rule.

This is because 'allowing civil servants to publicly express their private views on Government policy would compromise the performance of their duty by undermining discipline and trust within the civil service', said Dr Lee.

The Council was asked by the Government in April 2007 to study ways of managing the impact of new media on society.

It came up with a consultation paper in August last year and invited public views.

One observation from a group of bloggers, comprising academics and government employees, showed that civil servants 'are occasionally restrained' by rules on public communication.

In its report, Aims agreed with the bloggers that civil servants' comments may be useful because of the 'talented, well-educated and well-informed citizens' in its ranks.

Dr Lee said that current civil service rules on public communication are not different from what many big organisations such as MNCs or other governments would require of their staff.

Another reason: Official and privileged information - which civil servants are privy to - should be safeguarded.

Also, while the public may need channels for feedback, civil servants can turn to existing internal channels.

They can offer feedback directly to the relevant ministry or department to add value to a policy.

Academics and observers The New Paper spoke to were not surprised by the Government's response.

Singapore Management University law professor Eugene Tan said: 'The Government's focus and approach is clearly on institutional loyalty, discipline, effectiveness, and identity... That has to be.'

He added: 'I don't think there's a clamour, on the part of civil servants, to be given more space.'

Media lecturer Mr Cherian Georgenoted that, aside from the points cited by the Government in rejecting the Aims recommendation, there could be another potential concern - that senior civil servants could be pressured to campaign for their political bosses.

'So it is in the interests of civil servants to protect the wall between politics and civil service,' he said.

Some good possible

Institute of Policy Studies media researcher Tan Tarn How said that while the analogy of a big organisation such as an MNC makes sense, 'the Government is very big' and 'there may be some good if a civil servant comments on areas that do not involve his work directly'.

For example, he said, a police officer who has some views on police work should make use of internal channels to express his views.

'But what harm is there in a police officer or someone from the Ministry of Education commenting on environment policy?'

Mr Seah Kian Peng, MP for Marine Parade GRC and a former civil servant, disagreed.

Be it the civil service or any other organisation, said Mr Seah, 'it doesn't promote a good culture if someone from one department makes comments (on policy related to another department or ministry)'.
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Tanjong Pagar GRC MP Baey Yam Keng noted that despite the rule, 'there are occasions or opportunities for civil servants to give constructive criticism in public as long as they don't identify themselves as a civil servant.

'There are different capacities a civil servant can take, for instance, as a parent commenting on school policy or someone writing anonymously on an online forum.'

The former director at Mica added that while there were existing internal channels for civil servants' feedback, 'the civil service is such a big organisation that there may be challenges in getting views to reach the right level'.

'This is something that I hope the civil service will look into,' he said.

Nominated MP Siew Kum Hong was not as optimistic about the use of internal feedback channels within the civil service.

'It's quite different giving feedback through internal channels and when someone is expressing his private view publicly.

'It's really not a substitute. Just ask bloggers and people who participate in feedback channels,' he said.

'The civil servant may not be trying to influence policy... sometimes it may just be an expression of frustration.'

He added: 'I believe the Aims recommendation is about allowing citizens to exercise their rights as citizens.

'It's more than soliciting feedback on policy... Let people be people and speak freely.'

Govt says okay to 17 suggestions, rejects 9 Thumbs-up for:

Thumbs-up for:

E-ENGAGEMENT

1. Evaluate Government's capacity to communicate effectively online.
2. Rethink some of Government's current citizen engagement processes, e.g. closing the feedback loop.

ONLINE POLITICAL CONTENT

3. Retain Class Licence Scheme.
4. Extend positive list for Internet Election Advertising.
5. Liberalise Film Act in phases.
6. Target only films that mislead viewers
7. Establish independent advisory panel to decide on party political films.
8. Retain Section 35 of Films Act.

PROTECTION OF MINORS

9. Set up dedicated coordinating agency.
10. Set up annual fund.
11. Lift symbolic ban on 100 websites when agency satisfied that programmes are working effectively.
12. Focus on education
13. Develop research capabilities.

14. Collaborate with overseas counterparts.

15. Encourage spirit of volunteerism

INTERMEDIARY IMMUNITY FOR ONLINE DEFAMATION

16. Provide conducive and predictable legal environment for credible and responsible new media players to develop and flourish.

17. Enact legislation to confer limited immunity to intermediaries

Thumbs-down for:

E-ENGAGEMENT

1. Engage voices outside of current Government platforms.

2. Set up panel of young digital natives to serve as consultative body.

3. Give civil servants more space to voice opinions.

ONLINE POLITICAL CONTENT

4. Remove registration need for individuals, groups and political parties who provide online political content.

5. Decriminalise making of party political films.

6. Spell out clearly basis of any ban on suchfilms.

7. Independent advisory panel to advise onban.

8. Minister obliged to give reasons for ban.

PROTECTION OF MINORS

9. Help parents monitor and control their children's Internet usage to protect them from harmful and inappropriate online content.