

Criticism helps shape better policies, says new IPS director

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WHEN he was secretary-general of the Association of South-east Asian Nations (Asean), Mr Ong Keng Yong (picture) was subject to criticism from think-tanks about the grouping's conduct, with some flak even directed at him personally.

Now in his new role in the commentator's chair, Mr Ong vows not to shy away from a culture of critical thinking. In fact, he wants to encourage it.

Come Monday, Mr Ong will become the director of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), the think-tank's first since its merger with the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy last October.

"Public policy-making cannot exist in a vacuum. It has to absorb the views of as many people as possible," he told Today.

"The IPS has always engaged people critical of public policy-making. It will continue to take the best of these interactions and come out with better, easily understood policies."

Mr Ong said he learnt a lot from think tanks in his Asean role, and even enjoyed his interactions with observers and academics as they provided "useful perspectives".

His new role will focus more on policies relating to Singapore's domestic arena.

And Mr Ong wants to pursue important new issues such as food security.

Still, for someone who has spent his entire career in the public service, his role as IPS director "will be a big challenge".

This is because it requires him to deal not just with government agencies but also the private sector and people. "I have to try and observe public policy from a different angle. Of course, the advantage is that I come from the public sector. So I can bring 'an insider view' to my job."

His role will be to translate public policies into down-to-earth terms — as he puts it, to "move it closer to within the realm of the average citizen".

But it's a challenge he looks forward to. He said: "The past 10 years have equipped me with is my ability to wear different hats."

While serving as press secretary to then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, Mr Ong held other senior appointments in the People's Association and then-Ministry of Information and the Arts.

From 2003, he served as Asean secretary general, a role he handed over to Mr Surin Pitsuwan on Jan 1. Since then, Mr Ong has assumed the role of Ambassador-at-Large — just like Professor Tommy Koh who will continue as IPS chairman.

Said Mr Ong: "I will work with him to learn the ropes ... Prof Koh has always been an inspiration for me because he is able to straddle the public sector and academia."