

## **Debate on openness not closed – yet**

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***Today***, 13 January 2006

Another day, another forum and the same question: Is Singapore really an open society?

Speaking at the Singapore Perspectives conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies, author Catherine Lim and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (Iseas) political scientist Ho Khai Leong said yesterday that the new administration has taken only "half steps" towards a more open society, in which political freedom is like a "stream which meanders and sometimes disappears into the ground altogether".

Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports Vivian Balakrishnan countered that political openness was not an end in itself but part of the process of good governance.

According to Dr Lim, though, even if Singapore is to a certain extent succeeding in showcasing an alternative model to Western democracy, it is likely in the long run to lead to its own ruin.

The need for authentic expression was too important, she said. "It can neither be intimidated into permanent silence nor seduced by material wealth," she said. "And if it is, we are all worse off for it."

She called on the Government to let mavericks and "troublemakers" play their roles, as they give society a certain rambunctiousness. That kind of environment, she noted, nurtured a leader like Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew.

The alternative, she said, is a monolithic society, which makes standard copies of its leaders.

She also had a bigger concern.

"I've come to believe with a heavy heart that even if the Government wanted to do something about it, Singaporeans are so used to the Government making decisions for us, any major change will be viewed with alarm," said Dr Lim.

Another participant asked: "Are we depending too much on the Government changing, and not on ourselves changing?"

Dr Balakrishnan agreed.

"In a democracy, the people get what they deserve. The people decide whether they go along with policies. The people provide candidates for elections," he said.

Dr Ho, meanwhile, said there is now a greater need for openness due to "new realities" created by issues in the past year, such as academic freedom and the National Kidney Foundation scandal.

The latter "confirmed many Singaporeans' suspicion that something is rotten in the state of Denmark", said Dr Ho.

However, Iseas director K Kesavapany said later that "credit should be given where credit is due". "Did the Government sweep it (NKF) under the carpet?" he asked.

Wrapping up, Dr Balakrishnan emphasised results over openness or even partisanship.

"I don't really care whether the PAP is in power 50 years from now. I do care whether the Government 50 years from now is a Government with competence, honesty and commitment, one which is pragmatic and recognises the world as it is," he said.

"As for political dissidents, there will always be a place for them. But up to a point, they have to ask themselves: Are they willing to take responsibility, do more, get their hands dirty and have their results judged in real life - tangible outcomes, not mere theories."