Institute of Policy Studies

The Importance of Political Discussion in Singapore: Personal Reflections on the IPS Prism Project

Valerie Koh

The final workshop of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Prism project was recently concluded on 16 August. The project was a scenario planning exercise around the question, "How will Singapore govern itself in 2022?" It was conceived in the wake of the changes in the political landscape since the General Election of May 2011 and involved a series of workshops with members of different sectors in Singapore — young Singaporeans, civil society, new citizens, academics and public intellectuals, businesses, the public service, and the arts, culture and media sector.

The next stage of the project is to translate the scenarios that were developed into a public exhibition to be held in November 2012, to kick-start a wider public discussion about political attitudes and values of Singaporeans. This essay presents some of my personal reflections from the workshops I have attended.

Strong institutions are needed in democratic societies. The notion of a 'dream team' of strong institutions in these systems a competent civil service, a good electoral system, a corruption-free government, flourishing civil society, an independent judiciary and a free media has already been well discussed in our country.

However, there is another important ingredient in democracy that I would like to discuss here which lies at the heart of the Prism project – a citizenry that actively participates in politics to seek and create the common good.

Active participation in politics refers to an individual's conscious choice to be involved in the political sphere. This can range from running for political office to taking the time to read, think and discuss political issues with friends and family.

The main point is that individuals develop an understanding of others' situations, and why they favour certain policies. George described active participation as allowing "people to learn about the diverse interests that inhabit their society, and about the need for negotiation and compromise among them". [1] Often, policy-making requires weighing one group's priorities and values against another's, and there is often no clear answer as to what the optimal decision for the community is. An understanding of others' situations and interests

---

[1] Cherian George, *Singapore, the Air-Conditioned Nation: Essays on the Politics of Comfort and Control, 1990–2000* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 2000), 46.

makes the decision-making process real for individuals, forcing them to consider which policy can best achieve the common good.

The first step in actively participating in politics is engaging in political discussion — either publicly or in private. Ideally, political discussion should be public and "non-tyrannical", with participants having equal access and opportunity to influence the discussion.[2] It should also be based on knowledge — this could come from books, newspapers, and online blogs, among other potential sources.

This political discussion is important both for society and for the individual. Putnam distinguished between two forms of social capital — bonding capital and bridging capital.[3] Bonding capital develops relationships between similar individuals (for example, those who share the same race, age, religion or ideology) and can be exclusive, while bridging capital results when individuals develop relationships across groups (that is, with others who are different from them) and is more inclusive.

It is therefore important to know what sort of social capital is emanating from our political interactions. Leonard has argued that political conflict in Northern Ireland was conducive to the development of bonding capital (exclusive), while the bridging capital was strengthened as a result of the peace process (inclusive).[4] The political conflict highlighted the difference between groups, while the peace process involved individuals developing relationships with

One of the group discussion sessions at the final Prism workshop

---

[2.] Pamela J. Conover, Donald D. Searing, and Ivor M. Crewe, "The deliberative potential of political discussion," *British Journal of Political Science* 32 (2002): 21–62. Conover, Searing and Crewe define "non-tyranny" as being when discussions "admit and examine different viewpoints", and where these viewpoints are "open to contestation" (pp.24).
[3.] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000)
[4.] Madeleine Leonard, "Bonding and bridging social capital: Reflections from Belfast," *Sociology* 38 (2004), 927–44.

their former enemies. Political discussion that generates bridging social capital — which is focused on the overarching identity of being Singaporean — is especially important for our heterogeneous society.

The design of Singapore's electoral system underscores the importance of making forms of political discussion that bridge diversity available. A result of the first-past-the-post electoral system and the use of Group Representation Constituencies is that the proportion of opposition politicians in Parliament may be less than the proportion of votes their parties receive in elections. Political discussion about important policy and social issues with family and friends, on the Internet, and at public forums like the Prism project could build bridging social capital in between elections. An increased understanding of the needs and political positions of others could reduce the divide between members of the electorate who voted for the governing party and those that voted for the political opposition. This increased understanding could make it more politically feasible for the governing party to address the concerns of those who have voted for the political opposition; assuming that the governing party feels the policies that could be implemented in response to these concerns are 'right' for Singapore.

Developing the scenarios…

Responsive government is needed for this, and the recent National Day Rally speech by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong indicates that the current government is receptive to alternative views. Further examples of this increased receptiveness include the committee of younger ministers that was recently set up by PM Lee and chaired by Education Minister Heng Swee Keat, with the aim of engaging Singaporeans in a broad conversation about the country's policies, and the National Population and Talent Division's public engagement on Singapore's population challenges. For the government to truly be seen as responsive, these conversations should include representatives of as many groups as possible. Choices between value systems underpin most policy decisions, and these committees should be transparent about why some ideas were accepted and others not.

A responsive and capable government is also needed to mitigate some of the potentially adverse effects of political discussion. McClurg found that political participation among political minorities decreased when they encountered "dissonant political opinions".[5] Spoilt

---

[5.] Scott D. McClurg, "Political disagreement in context: The conditional effect of neighborhood context, disagreement and political talk on electoral participation," *Political Behavior* 28 (2006), 349–66. McClurg measured "political participation" by whether respondents voted, worked on a campaign, displayed a bumper sticker or sign, donated money or attended political meetings; and measured the

votes aside, the effect of political discussion on voter turnout will be mitigated by Singapore's compulsory voting laws. However, this clearly reinforces the need for a responsive government that is willing to engage all Singaporeans to prevent political minorities from withdrawing from the political sphere. Kim argued that increased social capital does not translate to, and could even negatively affect, "levels of political trust and commitment to voting" in consolidating democracies.[6] This is as because trust in the political institutions present is also important. He also found that this negative correlation seen in South Korea could be mitigated by citizens' perceptions of good government performance, for example, through low levels of poverty and political corruption.

Bridging political discussion would also strengthen other political institutions. For example, Mill argued that political discussions help individuals to identify with the public.[7] It is this collective identification that engenders a sense of duty to society and expands civil society.

A lot of political discussion about Singapore has been taking place on the Internet. This platform certainly has the potential to be a great leveller, exposing individuals to a variety of sophisticated arguments and discussions across space that might not have occurred otherwise. However, online discussion in Singapore has often been ugly and antagonistic too.

Participants at the final Prism workshop looking at some of the work done by other participants

The potential for online discussion to be beneficial depends on whether it is public (in both context and content) and non-tyrannical, and whether individuals have equal access and opportunity to influence this discussion. Most of the platforms for online political discussion — Twitter, Facebook, forum discussions and blogs are fairly public. However, this content is not always 'public', that is, content that is rational and is not "impassioned,

---

level of "dissonant political opinions" that a respondent would encounter by using the "presidential vote preferences of respondents, discussants, and the respondent's neighbourhood".

[6] Ji-Young Kim. "'Bowling together' isn't a cure-all: The relationship between social capital and political trust in South Korea," *International Political Science Review* 26 (2005), 193–213. Kim tested data from South Korea and found that involvement in civil society or leisure groups and social trust "negatively influenced trust in political institutions" and did not significantly increase participants' commitment to voting.

[7] John S. Mill. *Representative Government, 1861*. Accessed 4 September 2012, http://www.constitution.org/jsm/rep_gov.htm.

extreme, and the product of particular interests".[8] The very public context of the Internet gives users the ability to hold others accountable for the views they express in a civil and reasoned way, generating transformative discussion. Transformative discussion occurs when participants "admit *and* seriously examine different viewpoints" — requiring "not only diversity of opinion but reasoned justification around it" (emphasis in original).[9]

Yet, the public context of the Internet can also be used for cyber-bullying. Cyber-bullying occurs when those who share civil, but perhaps impolite[10] opinions are castigated, and this reduces the quality and scope of online political discussion. Cyber-bullies sometimes attempt to silence Internet users who hold opposing viewpoints by posting their targets' mobile numbers and email addresses online. Such behaviour can be addressed through formal legal prosecution, or when other members of the online community hold cyber-bullies accountable for their harassment. The latter seems more realistic given the Internet's amorphous and anonymous nature and the difficulty of policing every website, blog and Twitter feed. However, it is also important to recognise the difficulty that members of the online community might face in holding cyber-bullies accountable. More thought will have to be given to this emerging area of active citizenship.

As a member of the team working on the IPS Prism project, I have had the opportunity to attend all the workshops held over the past two months. Like others on the team, I enjoyed hearing the diversity of arguments that Prism participants made. The discussions were both informative and transformative, involving an appreciation of others' opinions and the contestation of one's own opinions.

Active Prism participation – participants lining up in front of their favourite scenario

---

8. Lynn M. Sanders. "Against deliberation," *Political Theory* 25 (1997): 347–76.
9. Conover, Searing and Crewe, "The deliberative potential of political discussion," 54.
10. Zizi Papacharissi. "Democracy online: Civility, politeness, and the democratic potential of online political discussion groups," *New Media & Society* 6 (2004), 259-283. Papacharissi makes the distinction between uncivil contributions and impolite contributions, with the former being "harmful for democratic norms" and the latter being "discussion that does not acknowledge the etiquette basics".

As a recent graduate and a younger Singaporean, it was sometimes difficult to speak up, for fear of being wrong or having my arguments challenged. Our political views sometimes form significant parts of our identity, and it can be uncomfortable when they are challenged. But this is an important part of the process of developing substantiated and defensible opinions, and I feel that the rewards of being engaged in political discussion is well worth the risk. The Prism participants were certainly very generous and exemplary in their democratic behaviour.

Over the next few weeks, the Prism team will be working on the public exhibition of the project, which will hopefully represent the ideas from the workshops in a way that is sophisticated, but which is accessible and engages as many Singaporeans as possible on a deep level. All discussions are conceived, structured and first include groups of varying smallness – and hence are sometimes perceived as the preserve of the elite. But now, the Prism project looks to achieve its final goal of engaging the broader public to hopefully spark civil and transformative conversations that last beyond the length of this project. The Prism team is working hard to present material that takes the public discussion well beyond the three scenarios that came out of the workshops.

Mill argued that "it is when they [individuals] attend only to one [side] that errors harden into prejudices, and truth itself ceases to have the effect of truth, by being exaggerated into falsehood". [11] This argument was paraphrased by Conover, Searing and Crewe as: "preferences without reasons are prejudices".[12] I hope that the Prism project will stimulate a political discussion that is diverse, civil and non-tyrannical, and has a lasting transformative effect.

*****

The IPS Prism public exhibition will be held from 8 – 14 November at the National Library.

The views expressed are the author's and do not represent those of the Institute.

If you have comments or feedback, please email ips.enews@nus.edu.sg

---

[11.] John S. Mill. *On Liberty, 1860.* Accessed 4 September, 2012, http://www.constitution.org/jsm/liberty.htm.
[12.] Conover, Searing, and Crewe, "The deliberative potential of political discussion," 58.