

IPS Corporate Associates' Lunch Dialogue with Mr Ng Chee Khern on Smart Nation

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Guest speaker, Mr Ng Chee Khern (right), with chairperson, Dr Limin Hee (centre), and IPS Adjunct Senior Research Fellow, Mr Manu Bhaskaran (left).

SINGAPORE'S Smart Nation initiative was launched by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong during his 2014 National Day Rally speech. On 7 November 2017, Mr Ng Chee Khern, Permanent Secretary for Smart Nation and Digital Government in the Prime Minister's Office, was invited to the IPS Corporate Associates' Lunch to give an update on the initiative, and to discuss opportunities for businesses. Dr Limin Hee, Director of Research at Singapore's Centre for Liveable Cities, chaired the session and Mr Manu Bhaskaran, IPS Adjunct Senior Research Fellow, gave the opening remarks.

Mr Bhaskaran kicked off the session by highlighting some current Smart Nation initiatives. This included investing in research and development, building computational capabilities, and

encouraging experimentation in areas such as autonomous vehicles and equipping HDB homes with smart technologies.

Realising the Smart Nation agenda

Mr Ng provided a brief background on the changes to the Smart Nation initiative, from its launch in 2014 to the recent formation of the Smart Nation and Digital Government Office (SNDGO) under the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), which comprised relevant staff from the Ministry of Finance (MOF), Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI) and PMO. The Government Technology Agency (GovTech), a statutory board under MCI was also placed under PMO as the SNDGO's implementing agency. The latest moves were aimed at promoting integration of strategy and processes, and to allow the Government to better prioritise and accelerate key Smart Nation projects such as the National Digital Identity system and e-Payments.

Mr Ng also highlighted some past Government achievements that many may not have been aware of, but have benefitted from, such as the ease of applying for a passport, borrowing books and other resources from the library, and parking without physical coupons. This was because the technologies implemented were meant to be unobtrusive and intuitive for users. And even though little fanfare surrounded these achievements, they set a standard that Singapore could build on.

Also in the works were plans to develop the next generation of digital infrastructure, and the introduction of a 'Public Sector Governance Bill', which would allow government agencies to share data more freely amongst agencies, to allow Government to better reap the benefits of big data.

Selling Singapore as a Smart Nation

Becoming a Smart Nation is integral to Singapore's future. Mr Ng shared with the audience that the justification of moving towards a Smart Nation was borne out of "hope" and "fear" – hope for opportunities of a better future for both citizens and businesses, and fear of Singapore being left behind. Mr Ng added that Smart Nation is about taking full advantage of technology to create convenience to make lives better for citizens, enterprise effectiveness to make businesses more productive and efficient, and job opportunities for current and future generations.

Mr Ng said that globally, the "pace of change will only accelerate and Singapore has to be well positioned to embrace these changes". He gave the frank assessment that while Singapore was progressing "well enough" towards becoming a Smart Nation, we should not be complacent. There were areas where other countries such as Dubai, China and India, did better. These countries are in competition with us for investments. For example, Dubai announced its intention for government agencies to go paperless by 2021. A startup based in London or Boston could just as easily choose to go to Dubai and not Singapore. Singapore must strike the right balance: Starting bold and ambitious – but achievable – projects to attract the best people and talent. He added that since our rivals were aggressive in promoting their

plans, we should not sell ourselves short, and be too modest about our achievements, otherwise we would lose out in the global competition for investments and talent.

Mr Ng also said that Smart Nation is intended to be inclusive by design and to benefit all segments of society. As an example, scoping ourselves as a 'smart city' or 'smart government' is not sufficient, as the benefits need to be extended to the private sector and create job opportunities as well. Industry and citizen engagement and citizen engagement was also important. However, Mr Ng acknowledged that many Singaporeans were not receptive towards new technologies, for the fear that it would take away, instead of create jobs. He said that the government would have to address this, and wished that there could be a "social movement" to drive enthusiasm for Smart Nation.

Wanted: Digital champions

Mr Ng said that companies should seize the opportunities provided by the government to become "digital champions". This could mean bidding for government contracts to develop new technologies, or partnering with the Info-communications Media Development Authority (IMDA) to digitalise their business. The government would like to facilitate the matching of the needs of government agencies with innovative companies and tap on the expertise of leading industry players and research institutions to drive technological improvements. There would also be a calendar of events for 2018 that would include industry briefings, roundtables, and thematic workshops to engage industry players.

Mr Ng emphasised that government alone could not drive the Smart Nation vision. Businesses would have to play their part "to convince Singaporeans that going digital is safe and efficient".

Question-and-Answer session

Dr Hee asked how the government could foster open innovation in Singapore. She said that big names in the autonomous vehicle industry would prefer to carry out tests in Japan as "their regulations are kinder than any other country on automation". In response, Mr Ng said that companies could tap into the various sources of funding from the government and leverage expertise within the government. Most government agencies have adopted a pro-enterprise, pro-innovation mindset, and created sandboxes for experimentation. Furthermore, the government has also adopted a light-touch approach on regulation.

Another participant asked how Singapore would plan to deal with issues of ethics and consciousness with the rise of artificial intelligence (AI). Mr Ng replied that there could be a council to guide AI ethics and governance, similar to the current Bioethics Advisory Committee that provides guidance on bioscience research. Singapore could learn from other countries with more experience with AI. He added that Singapore would probably take a moderate stance on data privacy issues, taking reference from China (being the most lax) and the European Union (being the strictest).

A participant asked Mr Ng about some of the strategies Singapore could employ in co-existing with China as a technological giant, while noting the danger of ceding to foreign players control over sensitive sectors of the economy. Mr Ng replied that the government has not identified the areas in which Singapore would want to maintain sovereign capability in. Foreign players

had not shown much direct interest in the Singapore market as it was small. It was also unlikely that the freedom of operation Chinese technological companies have enjoyed in China would last forever. To illustrate, Mr Ng gave the anecdote of a Chinese official who wondered how Singapore had managed to maintain competitiveness in its e-Payment landscape amongst multiple payment modes, as opposed to letting a single player dominate.

Another participant asked about the sustainability of a Smart Nation, and whether it could burst like the dot.com bubble. In response, Mr Ng said that the scenario was unlikely to happen. Unlike the dot.com boom that had a narrower base, smart technologies such as big data, AI, and robotics, were pervasive and would have an impact on every aspect of our lives.

In closing, Dr Hee asked Mr Ng whether he saw himself more as the Wizard of Oz or an enlightened entrepreneur. She explained, "people viewed the wizard as an omnipotent being, when it was just a guy in the closet pulling a lot of levers". The enlightened entrepreneur on the other hand "pushes out a lot of data and data insights and encourage developers to jump in". He replied, "I think there are different personas", adding that, "in a very narrow sense, my role is just to implement projects". At a wider level, he would have to drum up enthusiasm and encourage enough of a movement to ensure that Singapore succeeds as a Smart Nation.

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