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# Innovative governance in driving Singapore forward

WHY THE COUNTRY NEEDS THINKERS AND TINKERERS

An innovating society will vigorously try out proposed solutions to recurrent and future problems, making a hard-headed and multi-dimensional evaluation of the outcomes. If the policy options after evaluation show that the solutions need to be reformed, it will move on to try other alternatives.

Such a society has an inspirational discontent with the status quo, given the highly competitive and unpredictable world today.

Most societies stagnate because they are not organised to adequately evaluate outcomes, and so they generally continue to maintain the status quo or let it lapse, often due to political predicaments.

In contrast, innovating societies, like innovators, are venturesome, enjoy the cutting edge and make possibilities a reality, with execution capabilities.

One strength of such a society is having the organisational mindset and methodology throughout the government to regularly evaluate policy outcomes. Given this attitude of constant and critical evaluation of public policy decisions, innovating societies punch above their weight globally.

International experts often cite Singapore as one of the world's most liveable cities, one that continues to be regularly attuned to being future-ready at every turn of the decade.

Some of the policies unveiled in the 2015 Budget captured the spirit of an innovating society: One that constantly reviews public policies and their impact on the people.

Take the Silver Support Scheme and SkillsFuture initiatives, for instance. One will strengthen the social safety net, while the other aims to engender a society that will make



A protest at Hong Lim Park. Activism is a worldwide phenomenon and has increased as a result of social media and a more vocal middle class. Senior civil servants, not only politicians, must learn to appreciate groundswell management of policies and proactively engage activists. PHOTO: ERNEST CHUA

failure, getting up and going at it again acceptable.

Indeed, SkillsFuture could be transformational. In many ways, Singapore is trying to decouple academic achievements to become an "un-college" nation. The larger aim is for the country to pursue continuing education as a new way of managing continuous disruption, and for its people to manage their own careers, lifestyles and financial health.

But are these policies enough for Singapore to continue to be an innovating society? As the Republic marks its Golden Jubilee this year, it is timely to consider what it must do to prepare

for changes in the future. My suggestions are as follows.

## ENGAGING SINGAPOREANS, KNOWING THE GROUNDSWELL

First, replace the Campaign Nation with a Nation in Conversation. For more than three decades, we were a campaign nation when government messaging management played a role from bedroom issues (such as having babies) to boardroom polices (such as productivity).

Through the years, those campaign messages also formed the Singapore core of law-abiding citizens who implicitly absorbed meritocratic principles underpinned by a strong sense of racial and religious bonds despite differences, and a melting pot that embraced core national norms.

Today, Singaporeans seek richer public discourse and active popular participation. We expect policies to be crafted to benefit broad swathes of the public over time.

In place of the talk-down campaign strategies, we must have a nation in conversation: The policymakers and implementers in dialogue with their own diverse groupings. However, we must continue to confront, as was done in the past, the real problems and challenges the country faces.

Second, senior policy planners should know the groundswell. In the earlier decades, feedback to the political leadership was from senior civil servants, politicians and grassroots leaders, and there was an unstated intermingling between these "feedback" groups.

All saw the big picture of survival, and later the significance of positioning Singapore in an ever-changing world. Today, some senior civil servants do

not seem to have the same connection and communication competencies as their bureaucratic predecessors.

It is said that when the 9/11 terrorist attacks occurred, top civil servants were asked how the Malay ground reacted; they did not have Malay friends who could provide feedback.

This also means there is a need to engage activists in Singapore. Activism is a worldwide phenomenon and has increased as a result of social media and a more vocal middle class. Senior civil servants, not only politicians, must learn to appreciate groundswell management of policies and proactively engage activists.

## MORE SERVICE, LESS AUTHORITY

Third, we need a "What can I do for you?" culture in the civil service and corporate world. With growing expectations of the government innovation cycles being so short, we need a new breed of top management who not only should have a better ground feel but are also prepared to empower their staff to assess and meet the needs of citizens and clients.

The digital revolution is disruptive. Technology advances have encroached on tasks previously considered too cerebral to be automated, including legal work and accounting. So, the civil service should focus on service ("What can I do for you?") and less on authority ("How can I regulate?"), which can now be better managed through "apps" and other innovative ways.

In short, top management must be thinkers and tinkerers, comfortable with real-time information to serve the people, meeting the demands of an activist citizenry and being thought leaders for innovative ideas.

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