Source: *The Business Times,* p3
Date: 19 January 2016

Good to have more data-driven policies: Swee Keat

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SINGAPORE would benefit from a more data-driven approach to policy-making, said Minister for Finance Heng Swee Keat on Monday.

"I do think that as a society we need to be better at using data, we need to be better at looking at how we can have more data-driven policymaking and data-driven work," said Mr Heng to about 900 attendees at the Singapore Perspectives 2016 conference, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies.

He was responding to a question about public access to information from Ho Kwon Ping, chairman, board of trustees, Singapore Management University, who aired the view that information is the "lifeblood" of dialogue in civil society. Acknowledging the view that a US-style Freedom of Information Act would be too radical here, Mr Ho had asked whether Singapore should have a code of conduct for civil servants instead.

This, he said would lay out a framework to make data and information easily available to the general public – except for special circumstances where security is at stake.

To this, Mr Heng said that the Department of Statistics regularly puts out a slew of data publicly – with more to come, as the smart nation initiative picks up speed.

But while he said that the government will certainly be providing more data in the years ahead, he emphasised that "it's also about what the private sector can do" to analyse and make use of such data.



Mr Heng: "It's not as if there is a gold standard which we must all strive towards. I've always believed that every society must decide for itself what is it that it wants... "
PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN/THE STRAITS TIMES

In a wide-ranging dialogue session spanning one-and-a-half hours, Mr Heng fielded questions from three panellists – Mr Ho, Ambassador Bilahari Kausikan, and Ambassador Chan Heng Chee. One topic that dominated the discussion was Singapore's future political landscape – and in particular, what it should aim to avoid.

For one, Mr Heng said Singapore should not go the way of the United States, where parties are polarised and discussions marked by grandstanding to canvass votes.

"I hope that we maintain a certain seriousness of purpose in our political life," said Mr Heng, adding that Parliament should not be a source of entertainment but rather an arena for considered political discussion.

He expressed his dismay at countries where much time is spent fighting along sectarian lines, with systems mired in political gridlock. This only serves to hurt the common man, he said.

"I find that very troubling and I hope that we don't get there," said Mr Heng. He stressed that Singapore's benchmark – especially when it comes to managing social, economic, and political issues – should not be the "so-called first world".

"It's not as if there is a gold standard which we must all strive towards. I've always believed that every society must decide for itself what is it that it wants; what are the challenges that it faces; what are the circumstances which (it is) in – and then have the courage and the conviction to figure out how do we get there," said Mr Heng.

He also repeated his belief that some basic "facts of (Singapore's) existence" will not change – its small size, its lack of natural resources, its situation in a vulnerable region, among others.

The key, he said, is to think about how to turn these immutable factors into points of advantage – much like how Singapore has developed into a hub for the region.

Said Mr Heng: "By recognising where we are and what are the constraints, we are in a better position to transcend it and do something really creative about it."

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