

# ‘Culture change key to solving complex issues facing S’pore’

**SINGAPORE**—Overcoming the “big hurdle” of bureaucratic silos requires a change of culture and is critical to good governance in a complex operating environment, a former head of civil service said. This entails working in a “networked manner” with stakeholders to tackle complicated issues such as terrorism, for example.

Mr Peter Ho, now an adjunct professor at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies and who chairs various government-linked agencies, said that a whole-of-government or even a whole-of-nation approach is necessary to solve and view “wicked problems” in their manifold dimensions.

In his inaugural speech yesterday at the IPS-Nathan Lectures held at the National University of Singapore, Mr Ho referred to the threat of terrorism and said: “No single ministry or government agency (be it the Defence

Ministry or the Home Affairs Ministry) has the full range of competencies to deal with this threat on its own. Instead, the efforts of many agencies have to be coordinated and brought to bear on this problem in a whole-of-government approach.”

Speaking to about 500 attendees made up mostly of undergraduates, civil servants and those from the private sector, Mr Ho said that, in Singapore, urban planning is another “wicked problem” — defined by him as a problem with no immediate or obvious solutions.

As a small city-state, the country has to take into account multiple challenges of making space for several needs such as housing, green space, commercial land and military training areas. The entire process would involve close collaboration among economic, social and development min-

istries and agencies, as well as public consultation.

“Such plans are only possible because of the embrace of a whole-of-government approach, in which trade-offs in land use are made among the agencies. What is protected is not the narrow sectoral interests of the various ministries and agencies, but the larger national interest,” Mr Ho said, adding that the Smart Nation and Digital Government Group was set up recently to push the Smart Nation drive in a whole-of-government fashion.

It is also important to view governance as more than just a service provider today, because it has to go deeper to engage and network with stakeholders. For instance, in tackling the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) threat, there was outreach to the community, the Religious Rehabilitation Group was started, and the private sector got involved to develop security infrastructure, he explained.

“The JI poses a multi-dimensional (terrorism) threat that not only requires collaboration among security agencies, but also with social agencies that have oversight of issues affecting local communities ... The Singapore approach is to fight the JI network

with whole-of-nation networks. That is networked government in action,” he said.

During Mr Ho’s lecture, titled Hunting Black Swans and Taming Black Elephants: Governance in a Complex World, he played on the commonly known phrase “white elephants” and spoke about how governments have been unprepared for “black elephants”, meaning a problem visible to everyone who pretends it is not there because they do not wish to deal with it.

He raised Brexit as an example, noting that the United Kingdom Treasury and British military had no contingency plans even as polls showed it would be a close call.

Taking questions after his lecture, Mr Ho highlighted climate change as one problem where initial warning signs went unheeded and flash floods followed. The Singapore Government overcame this, he said, but the bigger question is how fast it takes to respond to such problems confronting the country every now and then. It is important, he concluded, that there are people within the Government whose jobs are to focus on such long-term issues and to spot potential “black elephants”. **TAN WEIZHEN**



**COMMENT  
& ANALYSIS  
THE  
FUTURE-OF-  
GOVERNMENT  
APPROACH IS  
IMPORTANT,  
BUT NOT EASY  
TO EXECUTE 32**



*While a Whole-of-Government approach is imperative for dealing with complex and intractable problems, it is not easily achieved as governments tend to be organised into vertical silos and important information is not shared, said former head of civil service Peter Ho. A change in culture will be needed to overcome this instinct to operate within silos, said Mr Ho, who is currently the senior adviser to the Centre for Strategic Futures, in an IPS-Nathan Lecture yesterday. Mr Ho added that, with increasing complexity, governments will also have to transform from being a direct service provider to function in a more networked manner with multiple stakeholders. Below is an excerpt from his lecture.*

Given the complexity of our world, interdisciplinary collaboration is essential for solving the big challenges of today, in science and technology, in the social sciences, in the economy, in urbanisation and in the environment. Why not also in geopolitics, geostrategy and geoeconomics?

It is not possible, for example, to separate the conduct of foreign policy from other large national interests like economics and trade. So, there has to be a lot of internal coordination and sharing of information.

To this end, inter-agency coopera-

tion requires good leadership to grow and this is, in part, reflected in Singapore's system of coordinating ministers, a position first established in 2003 with the appointment of the first-ever Coordinating Minister for Security and Defence. Now there are three coordinating ministers who cover the entire spectrum of government functions — namely national security, economic and social policies, and infrastructure. The establishment of these three positions marks the transformation of the Singapore Government from a traditional hierarchy into a new-age system of governance characterised by a Whole-of-Government approach.

#### BREAKING DOWN SILOS

This transformation is significant because the Whole-of-Government approach is an important response to

#### INTER-AGENCY COOPERATION A PRIORITY FOR SINGAPORE

# The future-of-government approach is important, but not easy to execute

managing complexity and dealing with wicked problems.

(Design theorists Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber described wicked problems as complex, large and intractable with no immediate or obvious solutions. They have causes and influencing factors that are not easily determined ex ante. They hardly ever sit conveniently within the responsibility of a single agency. Worse, they have many stakeholders, each of which sees these problems from different perspectives, and has divergent goals. This means there are no immediate or obvious solutions because nobody can agree on what the problems are in the first place, never mind what the solutions should be.)

The natural — but often inappropriate — reductionist approach would be to break down a wicked problem into smaller parts, and then leave it to each agency to make its own, decentralised and bounded decisions.

In contrast, an organisation that breaks down vertical silos encourages the spontaneous horizontal flow of information that will enlarge and enrich the worldview of all agencies. This in turn improves the chances that connections otherwise hidden by complexity, as well as emergent challeng-

es and opportunities, are discovered early. It is an environment in which officers consider the spill-over effects of what they do and their impact on the policies and plans of other agencies.

It is a mindset of willingly working together to achieve common national outcomes, instead of serving the particular interests of individual agencies. Take terrorism as an example. No single ministry or government agency — not the Ministry of Defence or the Ministry of Home Affairs — has the full range of competencies to deal with this threat on its own. Instead, the efforts of many agencies have to be coordinated and brought to bear on this problem in a Whole-of-Government approach.

This insight — and the looming challenge of transnational terrorism — led the Singapore Government to set up the National Security and Coordination Secretariat.

Whole-of-Government looks eminently reasonable — on paper. But while Whole-of-Government may be an imperative for dealing with wicked problems, it is not easily achieved. Governments, like any large hierarchy, are organised into vertical silos. For Whole-of-Government to work, these vertical silos need to be broken down, so that information can flow horizontally to reach other agencies.

But it is a Sisyphean effort. Whole-of-Government is antithetical to a deeply-ingrained bureaucratic instinct to operate within silos. More insidiously, institutional identity is something so strong that it colours how each agency views or prioritises national interests.

(American social psychology professor) Richard Nisbett, in his book, *The Geography of Thought*, takes this argument even further. He suggests cultural bias. For instance, Westerners tend to see the world in terms of individuals who are linked to others, and the surrounding environment, in axiomatic ways. From this emerges the emphasis placed in the West on individual rights and the rule of law. In contrast, East Asians — Prof Nisbett

● CONTINUED ON PAGE 33

“It is not just a matter of coordination of roles and actions. At its core, Whole-of-Government means finding consensus on strategic priorities.”





● CONTINUED FROM PAGE 32

refers primarily to the Sinic cultures — tend to see individuals, communities and their environments interacting more organically, in a dynamic ecosystem.

Neither approach is more right than the other, but relying solely on either limits our ability to perceive problems from multiple angles.

Extrapolating from this, it is not hard to see why one of the big challenges of government — especially the hierarchical Westminster western model that the Singapore Government is derived from — is the occurrence of bureaucratic silos, where information and coordination flow vertically, rather than develop horizontally. This, in turn, is an organisational impediment to the sharing of insights and information critical to thinking about the future.

This is a big hurdle to overcome. It requires not just a lot of effort but also a real change of culture to surmount this instinct to operate within silos, in order to make Whole-of-Government work properly.

Often, the leader must nag his people to remind them that the Whole-of-Government imperative takes precedence over narrow sectoral interests and perspectives. But this mindset is so important to good governance in a complex operating environment that the Whole-of-Government approach today is a priority of the Singapore Government. There are inter-agency platforms that have been established to share information among ministries, statutory boards and other agencies, in order to take in different ideas and insights, so that wicked problems can be viewed in their manifold dimensions.

Coordinating bodies now deal with cross-agency issues, such as the National Climate Change Secretariat and the National Population and Talent Division.

Two years ago, the Government set up the PMO Strategy Group with the mission of Whole-of-Government policy development and coordina-

tion. Most recently, the Government announced the establishment of the Smart Nation and Digital Government Group to give a further Whole-of-Government push to the Smart Nation effort.

## URBAN PLANNING

At this stage, let me take up the issue of urban planning, a uniquely wicked problem for Singapore. While other countries have large land areas, which allow new cities to develop and replace other cities that may decline in relevance and fortune, Singapore, as a small city-state in an island, does not have that luxury.

Instead, urban planning in Singapore needs to take into account the challenge of packing in housing, green space, industrial land, commercial and retail space, land for transportation needs, and military training areas, all within the confines of a small island of 718 square kilometres, which is less than half the size of London, and only two-thirds the size of New York.

In Singapore, the entire process of urban planning involves close collaboration among economic, social and development ministries and agencies. It also entails consultations with various stakeholders in the private sector and the general public. This Whole-of-Government approach enables all stakeholders to better understand dependencies and implications of land use and strategic decisions.

Planning so far ahead and for multiple possible functions is inherently complex and invariably involves many uncertainties. So, national scenarios are used to factor in these uncertainties. Plans are also regularly reviewed. This process of long-term planning and regular review has enabled Singapore to anticipate its needs far in advance, and provides the flexibility to respond to surprises and to adapt to changes over time.

But such plans are only possible because of the embrace of a Whole-of-Government approach, in which

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trade-offs in land use are made among agencies. What is protected is not the narrow sectoral interests of the various ministries and agencies, but the larger national interest.

At its core, Whole-of-Government means finding consensus on strategic priorities. Consensus is made possible through processes like scenario planning because they help align the government agencies to the larger national interests.

## WHOLE-OF-NATION

But with increasing complexity, the role of the Government transforms from being a direct service provider, and becomes more of what the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research describes as a “lever of public value inside the web of multi-organisational, multi-governmental and multi-sectoral relationships”.

This is sometimes called networked government, which refers to the management of the webs of relationships within and surrounding government. It is not just about strengthening the formal and informal networks within government, but also those outside of government, both locally and internationally. For instance, government social services rely on collaboration with non-profit and community-based organisations. Examples like this do not indicate a diminishing importance of the Government’s role.

Instead, government may be understood as having multiplied its capabilities by extending its reach beyond institutional boundaries.

A government that operates in a networked manner deploys mechanisms that promote reach within the whole nation. Tackling the JI (Jemaah Islamiyah) threat has been a wicked problem for Singapore.

It is not just about removing the immediate threat that the JI posed to Singapore’s security. It also requires engaging multiple stakeholders, including community groups like the religious teachers who started the

Religious Rehabilitation Group.

It means engaging the private sector to help develop protective systems, processes and security infrastructure. This approach clearly needs not just many agencies of government coming together, but also bringing in the people and the private sectors.

In a way, it is not just a Whole-of-Government approach, but a Whole-of-Nation effort. This is because the JI poses a multi-dimensional threat that not only requires collaboration among security agencies, but also with social agencies that have oversight of issues affecting local communities. The Singapore approach is to fight the JI network with Whole-of-Nation networks. This is networked government in action. This Whole-of-Nation approach continues today with the SGSecure initiative, which is specifically targeted at building community networks. The SGSecure national movement aims to “sensitise, train and mobilise the community” as part of its response in the face of national threats.

Another example of the Whole-of-Nation approach is Our Singapore Conversation, a year-long process involving more than 600 dialogue sessions and nearly 50,000 participants. This process surfaced fresh insights for government — and for citizens — such as the desire for broader definitions of success or greater assurance about healthcare and retirement, that would otherwise have been much more difficult to obtain. It provided the basis for the Government to update, revise and change policies in response to a changing environment.

The rise of complexity in the world today throws up enormous challenges for governments around the world. Black swans will confront them, and they will have to deal with wicked problems. Black elephants will be lurking in the background. (Black elephants are problems that are actually visible to everyone, but no one wants to deal with them, and so they pretend they are not there.)

Foresight will help governments to better deal with complexity and its challenges. The concept of governance must also change in tandem with rising expectations and a more educated and empowered citizenry.

Government-by-Agency will evolve into Whole-of-Government, which in turn will embrace the broader Whole-of-Nation approach that includes business, civil society and the man-in-the-street. Collectively, these multi-sectoral actors will change the concept of governance, even if they are not part of “government”, traditionally defined. The future of governance in a world of complexity lies in such systems-level coordination.

But I should conclude by recounting Winston Churchill’s astute advice on the essential quality of a good government leader: “It is the ability to foretell what is going to happen tomorrow, next week, next month and next year. And then to have the ability afterwards to explain why it did not happen.”