

Singapore should strive to enlarge identity and stand strong in digital age

Key to our future lies in technology

✓ **CHARISSA YONG, THE STRAITS TIMES**

Singapore may be small but with new technology, it can shape a future that transcends its physical size and enlarges its identity, former head of the civil service, Mr Peter Ho, said yesterday.

Citing three countries that have reinvented themselves in the digital age, he urged Singaporeans to adopt a more hopeful view to balance the prevailing attitude that Singapore is a price-taker.

He made the call in his last lecture as the Institute of Policy Studies' S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore, a lecture series that explores Singapore's future.

Ideas that can inspire Singapore exist in Estonia, Denmark and Luxembourg, Mr Ho indicated.

Estonia, with 1.3 million people, introduced e-residency.

It now has 18,000 such residents who are not citizens of Estonia.

But they can set up companies based in the Baltic nation.

This scheme helps Estonia generate business for its companies, from independent contractors to small companies with clients worldwide.

Denmark, with 5.7 million

people, is mulling the creation of a "Silicon Valley Ambassador" to better engage digital companies such as Apple, Google and Facebook.

"This is almost as if technology was its own country, unlike the present," said Mr Ho.

The idea is for the ambassador to work with big companies on issues such as privacy and fake news, and perhaps influence their position.

Luxembourg, with fewer than 600,000 people, is creating a market by letting companies own resources obtained from space.

These are ideas to consider, Mr Ho told officials and students at the National University of Singapore.

Singapore does not have to be at the mercy of forces which it thinks are beyond its control.

"Because we are a small country, we often speak as if the future were a car speeding toward us – we can swerve, or we can run backward. But we cannot control the car."

But "even small city-states can influence, shape, and even create, not just markets but also their operating environment", he said.

Mr Ho gave two reasons for his optimism.

First, Singapore can experiment with policies and roll them out more easily because it is small.

It can also correct its course quickly if a policy turns out to be wrong or misguided.

Second, Singapore has experience in responding to complexity and uncertainty and can draw on it.

As a newly-independent nation, it eschewed import substitution, courted multinational corporations and chose multicultural meritocracy when its neighbours were going for the opposite.

But Singapore has to have the courage to seize this hope and reinvent itself, added Mr Ho, who is now a senior adviser at a think-tank, the Centre for Strategic Futures.

"Just as Sir Stamford Raffles made Singapore a free port in 1819, welcoming traders from any country, Singapore in 2017 could welcome data from any country – a free data port," he said.

It could allow data centres in Singapore to hold data governed by the laws of another country, as if they were stored in the source country.

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