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BY INVITATION

Trust the people, share government data

Expose the body politic to stress by being open with data to spark robust debates on Singapore's future.



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One of my recent big regrets is that I was unable to attend a single one of the five S R Nathan lectures delivered by Ho Kwon Ping as the first S R Nathan Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS). His lectures were brilliant. I wish I could have been there. I also wish that he will now compile them and produce a book. In this article, I would like to develop one of the suggestions he made.

As Singapore moves into a new era, it is clear that we have to prepare for new possibilities. It would be unwise to assume that the next 50 years will all be smooth sailing. Most normal countries have ups and downs. Singapore will also have ups and downs. So far, we have prepared well for the ups. The big question is whether we are prepared for the downs.

Our goal should be to create a resilient society. The best way to create resilience is to be exposed to stress from time to time. Let me use a medical analogy. The worst thing we can do to a human body is to protect it by putting it into an incubator, cutting it off from the world. The moment it leaves the incubator, it will not be able to handle even the smallest stress. The best thing we can do to a human body is to allow it to encounter and fight off bacteria and viruses in daily life, so that the body's immune system can develop immune cells and anti-bodies to handle these new challenges. When a human body is exposed to these manageable stresses, it will become more resilient.

Educated citizenry, best defence

THE same is probably true of the body politic of human society. It should also be exposed to stresses and strains from time to time.

Hence, for example, it may be better to have robust debates from time to time instead of an artificial calm. As a result of these robust debates, we will get an educated and informed citizenry. Such a citizenry is the best defence if a political crisis crops up.

An educated citizenry is also the best defence against a demagogic politician who tries to sway the voters with populist policies.

In his new book, former foreign minister George Yeo speaks about "the need to prune the banyan tree in order that civic participation could flourish". He adds: "Pruning the banyan tree means cutting down hierarchy. Letting more sunlight through enables the social network to be better energised." All this will generate a more educated citizenry.

The good news in Singapore is that we are halfway there. We have a very well-educated population, since we have one of the best education systems in the world.

However, we do not have a well-informed population because, relatively speaking, the civil service has been reluctant to share information - especially information about Singapore's public policies - with the population.

Sharing information is also critical if we are to succeed in becoming a test bed for urban solutions. I strongly support Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's call for global entrepreneurs and investors to use Singapore to test solutions to urban challenges.

That is why it is important to heed what PM Lee said at the 2010 Singapore Perspectives conference organised by the IPS: "It is useful for the public sector to cooperate with the IPS and to be forthcoming with information and access, for example, when IPS holds public forums or conducts policy research. This way, the Government can consult more widely and develop better thought-out policies, and IPS will be more effective in fostering informed discussion of policies outside government."

Unfortunately, despite his call, the civil service's approach to sharing data remains cautious.

Opaque data remains a problem

THE good news is that some steps are being taken to improve transparency. For example, in 2013, the Government announced that it would release more data and make existing data machine-readable.

The guiding principles of the Government's data sharing include making sure the data is as granular as possible, so that it is easy to access and analyse. This is indeed a positive trend.

On the other hand, many areas of opacity remain.

Last year, Singapore was ranked 63rd on the Global Open Data Index, tying with Bangladesh, Bermuda, Nepal, Senegal and Tunisia.

There are transparency concerns even in the business arena. A WikiLeaks cable from 2009 said: "Some US and other foreign firms have found the lack of transparency from the Singapore government and its government-linked corporations (GLCs) a serious challenge in operating in Singapore... While most foreign firms find Singapore among the world's easiest places to do business, for others the business and regulatory environment can be maddeningly non-transparent."

This is why I agree with a key point that Kwon Ping made in his final lecture. He said: "A governance culture of participatory democracy can work only if the institutions of civil society can be actively engaged in decision-making."

He then added: "For that to happen, civil society players need access to that lifeblood of robust discussion: Freely available and largely unrestricted information.

"Information is the oxygen without which civil society players suffocate in their own ignorance and resort only to repetitive drumming of their causes, but without the ability to really engage with their own members, with other players, or with government. Access to information is an existential imperative for civil society to perform its functions responsibly and knowledgeably.

"The currently unequal access to information is called 'information asymmetry' by academics, and one of the reasons all governments are averse to sharing information is not just because of the sensitivity of secrets, but because information is power, and asymmetry between seeker and owner

of information shapes their relative power relationship."

Kwon Ping also suggested some solutions. For example, he suggested that we should legislate a Code on Information Disclosure.

We should give this suggestion careful consideration. Equally importantly, we also have to consider whether we need to change the prevailing culture in Singapore when it comes to sharing information.

Making wise use of data

THE big question we have to ask is: Can we trust our own population to make wise judgments with the information given to them? And if we cannot trust them, what does that say about the resilience of Singapore's society?

This is why I am pleased to learn that the oral archives of Dr Goh Keng Swee will be released soon. We all know that just like Mr Lee Kuan Yew, he was intellectually brilliant. I learnt as much from him as I did from Mr Lee.

The most important lesson I learnt from Mr Lee and Dr Goh was that it is important to be brutally honest in analysing problems and situations. Both of them would prefer to confront an uncomfortable truth rather than accept a comfortable lie. Together with Mr S. Rajaratnam, they would say to me: "Don't tell me what you think I want to hear. Tell me what you think I should hear. Then let us decide."

As a result of this training from three great men, I have also tried my best to analyse issues as honestly as possible, bearing in mind that each society has its own constraints. I am confident that my fellow citizens in Singapore can do the same if they are presented with the same information.

I would therefore like to conclude by recommending that we find a way of changing the culture of sharing information in Singapore. Fortunately, the Government has just announced the formation of the Strategic Policy Unit (SPU). Its main task is to identify national priorities and come up with action plans that draw on resources across all its agencies.

Perhaps one additional task that could be assigned to the SPU would be to change the culture of sharing information. We can and should do so.

If we succeed in this goal, we would have helped to make Singapore a stronger and more resilient society.

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