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Headline: 'Civil servants must walk the ground first before making policies'

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SINGAPORE – Young civil servants should first walk the ground and understand the problems before they formulate policies, said former top mandarin Ngiam Tong Dow at the DBS Asian Insights Conference yesterday.

Mr Ngiam, who had served 40 years as Permanent Secretary in various ministries, was one of the panelists discussing the topic, How Can Singapore Future-proof its Relevance for the Next 50 Years.

Responding to a question from the audience on whether high salaries in the civil service are diverting talent and growth away from the private sector, he said that civil servants are worthy of their salaries but the way they are trained is important.

"When a young scholar comes back, he should not be sent to the Min-

istry of Finance's Treasury division and become the regulator. He should really be sent to the Economic Development Board (EDB), or the Housing and Development Board, and serve an internship of a year to learn the problems of the ground," said Mr Ngiam, who is an adjunct professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

"Unless the civil servant knows the problems on the ground, he would become just a regulator. And regulators, there are too many (of them) in Singapore," he added, prompting applause from the audience of about 900 Government, business and thought leaders.

Weighing in on the question, Banyan Tree Holdings executive chairman Ho Kwon Ping said that while tweaks to the public sector's pay



Mr Ngiam says there are too many regulators in Singapore. PHOTO: DBS

structure may have to be considered along the way, it is better to "err on the side of overpaying".

"It is better to tweak and reform

the system from where we are today than to have a system where civil servants are all forced to be corrupt because they are so underpaid," he said.

However, he noted the danger that this approach poses to the private sector. "(Companies) either have to keep up with the salaries, which are high, or you have an overbalance, or perhaps a hollowing out of the best and brightest in Singapore all going to the public sector. That may not be good for Singapore in the long run," he said.

Mr Ngiam added that well-educated Singaporeans should be spread across various segments of society and not be concentrated in the public sector. "If you just keep them within the Government, in the long run, (they) become an elite, become fossilised," he said. **KELLY NG**