

# All get a shot at success



Singapore should become a continuous meritocracy, said Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam

in a recent interview. **Elgin Toh** explores what it means and what it would take to make that transition.

TWENTY-NINE-YEAR-OLD Lionel Louis readily agrees it was an isolated incident. But it grated all the same.

Shortly after starting his dream career in the civil service, he was bypassed for an assignment he believed he was well-equipped to undertake.

Did it have anything to do with his background as a former Normal (Technical) and ITE student, he wondered at the time. Many of his peers had gone through the more conventional junior college-university route.

"I have to emphasise that I've been treated very fairly on the whole," said Mr Louis, now in his third year in the service, and who has a degree from Curtin University.

"But in that instance, there may have been an assumption that the task shouldn't be assigned to somebody who was not of a certain background."

He added: "It reminded me that I had to work harder to prove such assumptions wrong."

Incidents like this - possible workplace bias over what school you went to - are, by nature, exceedingly difficult to prove.

If they are true and, indeed, widespread, they raise questions about whether Singapore can claim that its meritocratic system, built up over decades, is in good working order.

After all, if the assessment of merit and ability is frozen at a certain age, where are the incentive and the opportunity to better your lot?

In an interview with The Straits Times earlier this month, Deputy Prime Minister Thar-

man Shanmugaratnam alluded to such doubts when he said the present meritocratic system needed to "evolve".

"We've got to be a continuous meritocracy where it doesn't matter so much what happened when you were in Sec 4 or JC 2 or when you finished your poly or ITE, but what happens after that," he said.

"Regardless of where you start we have to recognise what you have achieved to develop mastery in what you are doing."

To what extent has Singapore's meritocracy become "discontinuous"? Why and how did it happen? And what steps can be taken to confront the apparent ailment?

Insight spoke to observers and analysts for some answers.

## Education system

HISTORY gives one key explanation for Singapore's particular brand of meritocracy that tends to make judgments about individuals at a fairly young age, revising them only incrementally as the years go by.

Mr Tharman said that as a young nation, Singapore inherited the British and Chinese education systems, each of which was academically oriented and elitist.

Those who look at more recent history, such as Non-Constituency MP Yee Jenn Jong, recall the Goh Keng Swee report on education in 1979, which lamented the high dropout rates and other inefficiencies. This led to the introduction of streaming, which "sorted people out like in a production factory".

"Singapore was trying to attract multinational corpora-

tions and you had to fill up the employment fast," said Mr Yee, who added that this strategy has since become outmoded in today's innovation-driven era.

Human tendencies perpetuate the model, said Mr Donald Low of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP), who studies behavioural economics.

Employers often rely on academic results as a convenient proxy for ability because gathering more information is costly. Furthermore, once they label somebody as "good", the label tends to stick, which economists call the "halo effect".

Then, there is the cost of turnover. He said: "After going through so much effort searching and training the employee, if he turns out slightly short of the mark, you are better off just hanging on to him."

Over time, it seems, the risk has grown that the initial advantages and disadvantages a person sets out with could be affecting outcomes for longer than is healthy.

In a globalised and fast-changing world, the effects of not being continuously meritocratic go beyond unfairness. They also bring about inefficiency in a number of ways.

Ms Wong Su-Yen, Asean managing director of human resource company Mercer, cited work by Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner showing there are nine forms of intelligence. These are not easily captured by exams, which tend to focus on logical and linguistic intelligence.

"And just because something is easy to measure doesn't mean it's

the right measure for that particular job," she added.

Nominated MP Laurence Lien believes traditional notions of meritocracy do not take into account the importance of diversity.

"Employers often end up with staff who are too similar and who produce too much common thinking, which can be a serious impediment when dealing with complex challenges," he said.

The consensus is that much of the private sector, being exposed to free market competition, has faced less of a problem curbing such a tendency.

"If you don't hire someone who is good simply because he doesn't have a degree, he is going to join your competitor and compete against you," said Mr Soon Sze-Meng, a director in a multinational corporation.

The extent of the problem in the public sector, however, is controversial.

Mr Low, formerly a member of the elite Administrative Service, for instance, claims success came more easily to those on the scheme, as well as those on government scholarships.

"More opportunities are created for them. I've seen instances when a scholar didn't perform and was given a bad evaluation, only for someone higher up to ask, 'How can that be?'"

Mr Soon, however, said one cannot conclude from the data that a static meritocracy prevailed in the civil service.

In 2010, four out of 27 permanent secretaries were non-scholars, he noted. Last year, six in 10 statutory board CEOs did not hail from the Administrative Service.

## Barriers

WHILE the most obvious barrier to continuous meritocracy may appear to be employers, since they are the ones making hiring and promotion decisions, observers say they are seldom as insidious as the more improbable impediment - the employee or job seeker himself.

Ms Gog Soon Joo, executive director of the Institute for Adult Learning, which is part of the Singapore Workforce Development Agency (WDA), classifies them under three categories: informational, situational and dispositional.

The first simply refers to people not knowing about opportunities to upskill and so climb the economic ladder.

WDA has set up dozens of centres around the island to publicise its wide range of training courses - from aerospace to environmental cleaning - and job counselling services. It also holds roadshows in housing estates and distributes pamphlets to homes.

"We have a lot of good jobs and a shortage of labour. It's a matter of whether people know about them. A particular area may be crying out: I need nurses, I need nursing aides. These are better jobs. There are progression pathways," she said.

The second barrier refers to a situation a worker finds himself in.

Consider a low-wage worker

stuck in a dead-end job who would not mind doing a training course that might open doors to a more promising career. But this would involve forgoing overtime work and the extra cash it brings, which might just outweigh the desire to upgrade.

Dispositional barriers - or those related to the employees' beliefs and outlook - are the toughest to overcome. Someone who has absorbed a certain message about himself or about the world can, quite often, become immovable.

A risk-averse employee might resist a change in job role recommended by his employer - even though that could work in favour of his personal development, noted Ms Wong.

Quite often, these barriers begin forming when someone is still in school - which explains Mr Tharman's repeated reference to schools in his comments.

He said: "We have students who go through our education system, those who are doing well, who are very aware of their strengths... We have another group that goes through the system very aware of their weaknesses... They got into a certain stream or didn't get into a school of choice."

Dr Jason Tan of the National Institute of Education (NIE) notes how the former group tends to get a puffed-up sense of self-importance, while the latter group develops low expectations and a feeling of helplessness. This potentially plagues them for life and dampens the will to strive.

One group that reaches out to such students is the Chil-



Civil servant Lionel Louis, 29, feels that because he was a Normal (Technical) and ITE student, he has to work harder to prove his worth. He cites an incident when he was passed over for an assignment. However, he emphasises that he has been treated very fairly on the whole. PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

dren-at-Risk Empowerment Association (Care). It has been holding classes and events for secondary school students in the Normal (Technical) stream since 1997.

Executive director John Tan said: "Everyone is good at something. He just has to discover it. We believe in the students and we help them believe in themselves."

Some of his students have gone on to become entrepreneurs, civil servants and factory supervisors.

Of course, actual success is the best antidote to feelings of trepidation and negativity, but, as WDA's Ms Gog discovered, even this could be a very gradual process.

A senior vice-president of a local bank once confided in her phobia of showing others her resume. She was an N-level student.

Mr Tharman, who has been education minister, has called for some mixing of students "from primary school through to Sec 4".

But some analysts believe the solution has to be egalitarian schools - where students are not so clearly segregated into the strong and the weak, as they currently are.

The Finnish school system is often cited as equality in education that works. Students attend a school near their homes and for

years do not get numerical grades. NIE's Dr Jason Tan said that when streaming was first banned in Finland in the 1970s, the teachers' union protested that disparities in student calibre would make their jobs impossibly difficult.

"But those fears have proven to be unfounded. Finnish students routinely come in first in international tests," he said.

Mr Yee, who also supports a move in the Finnish direction, wants the Government to set up similar pilot schools for parents like himself who do not mind extracting their children from "the rat race".

But Ms Gog, also a parent, pre-

fers the Singapore system, which allows the slow learner to learn at a slower pace. She also cited Singapore's low unemployment rate and high employment rate - "the envy of many countries".

Another radical set of educational reforms mooted, this time by Singapore Management University (SMU) president Ho Kwon Ping, to counter the lack of continuous meritocracy, is a credit-based system for all secondary schools, coupled with a much more diverse set of subjects on offer, modelled on the American system.

This would allow students to pick disciplines they are strong in and earn credits for them.

"If I happen to be more bookish and you're more playful and creative, under the current narrow system,

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### SIMPLE ACTS OF COURTESY

DPM Tharman has painted an inspiring picture of what society can and should be. And we may not know when this can be achieved, but to me, what's important is for Singaporeans to strive towards it in our everyday lives, by showing a little respect and kindness to those around you, to your neighbours at the lifts, to the servers at coffee shops, to the bus captains we meet and so on.

- PAP MP Liang Eng Hwa (Holland-Bukit Timah)

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bingo, I do better than you, I'm on an upward trajectory and you're going downwards," he said.

Whichever set of reforms Singapore finally embarks on, Mr Tharman has said he hopes to see a different society emerging - one in which people show more respect for one another, regardless of occupation.

It is not yet clear, though, how this ideal state would emerge.

One view - Mr Soon's - is that societal respect currently lacking for certain jobs will come only when these low-skilled jobs gradually become skilled ones. This can happen only when the foreign worker population is moderated, leading to a natural rise in productivity, he reckoned.

LKYSP's Mr Low, on the other hand, believes Singaporeans' lack of respect for blue-collar jobs in general is cultural - and therefore much harder to change.

Said PAP MP Liang Eng Hwa (Holland-Bukit Timah): "DPM Tharman has painted an inspiring picture of what society can and should be.

"And we may not know when this can be achieved, but to me, what's important is for Singaporeans to strive towards it in our everyday lives, by showing a little respect and kindness to those around you, to your neighbours at the lifts, to the servers at coffee shops, to the bus captains we meet and

so on."

### Right direction

TO BE sure, Mr Tharman's comments have attracted some scepticism.

Mr Yee wondered "how many of his Cabinet colleagues agree with him".

But Mr Liang said the DPM's comments are only the latest in a series beginning with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's speech at the opening of Parliament in 2011, in which he pledged to fight social stratification.

Others, like Mr Low, see Mr Tharman's words as an attempt to improve Singapore's meritocracy without addressing fundamental objections to it.

He sees meritocracy on its own as a "limited notion of justice and fairness" and it should therefore be complemented by a "high amount of state support for those of lesser ability" - which in turn is contentious.

Still, most people, including Mr Low, agree that the latest comments represent a step in the right direction.

Even Mr Yee, who is from the Workers' Party, said he agreed completely with Mr Tharman's call for a more continuous meritocracy.

Added SMU's Mr Ho: "The things he said were long overdue."

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