

POPULATION WHITE PAPER

A debate about policymaking and consulting

Given the complex issues policymakers need to deal with, Govt might need greater plurality in views: Panellists

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SINGAPORE – The quality of public debate has improved “tremendously”, but can the same be said of Government decision-making, asked former Fortis Colorectal Hospital Chief Executive Jeremy Lim — who is also a prominent commentator on healthcare policies — yesterday, referring to the population White Paper released in January.

He also questioned how consultative the decision-makers are, given the complexity of issues that policymakers need to deal with these days.

In response, Chief of Government Communications Janadas Devan disagreed that the White Paper’s underlying assumptions were unsound. He added that the numbers in the White Paper were “fairly straightforward”.

The bigger problem, in Mr Devan’s words, is that “Singapore’s system is very good at putting out rational ar-



guments (but) it is not very good at managing the emotions”. Also, the policymaking process has become “much more complex”, he said.

“When we began in the ‘60s, the questions before us were all existential, you either did ‘A’ or you die. They were very straightforward ... stark. You either defended yourself or you lost your sovereignty,” said Mr Devan, who is also the Director of the Institute of Policy Studies.

“You either house 85 per cent of the population in public housing, or they live in slums. Now, the policy questions are nuanced, it is not obvious,” he added.

Dr Lim and Mr Devan were speaking at a panel discussion at a confer-

ence on population issues which was organised by the Singapore Management University’s Behavioural Sciences Institute (BSI).

Responding to a question from the audience about the quality of decision-making in the Government, Dr Lim said he was struck by how the White Paper did not contain a “single academic reference”.

He added: “I’m also struck that not a single academic has come out to say that the underlying assumptions in (the White Paper) stand up to academic scrutiny. There’s no shortage of academics criticising some of the fundamental premises but I don’t see the same number standing up to say, no, (the White Paper) is based on very good science.”

Dr Lim is currently the Principal Consultant at Insights Health Associates and he had previously held senior level executive roles in the Singapore public and private sectors. His public sector experiences include being a Senior Consultant at the Ministry of Health, Director of Research and Education at SingHealth, and Executive Director (and later Chair) of the SingHealth Centre for Health Services Research.

Dr Lim reiterated that “diverse

voices” are needed when it comes to complex issues. “I’m not that clear on how consultative and how diverse the decision-makers are. And in complex systems or issues, you do need diverse voices, all these voices (are) to be equally respected and I’m not sure this is happening,” he said.

Another panellist, Ms Debra Soon, Managing Director of Channel News-Asia, also alluded to the need for greater plurality in views in policymaking when she cited her concern that top decision-makers could increasingly come from the same socio-economic background and mix with the same group of people “from school all the way to your professional career”.

“This is a gap in terms of understanding what the masses (including) not-so-well-off Singaporeans are thinking. That’s how you get a disconnect,” she said.

However, BSI Director David Chan, who was the moderator of the discussion, pointed out: “I think in every country I know of, the political leadership and civil service is not a random representative sample of the population.”

Nevertheless, he agreed that political leaders must be able to connect with the people.

● ‘Singapore’s system is very good at putting out rational arguments (but) it is not very good at managing the emotions,’ said Chief of Government Communications Janadas Devan.