

## SINGAPORE PERSPECTIVES 2009 CONFERENCE

### **Nation's next step? Nourish its soul Panellists discuss what country needs in quest to be First World state**

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SINGAPORE loves topping global rankings. But it will truly join the First World only when it improves its levels of optimism, diversity and other neglected indices of the 'soul'. A paradigm shift as bold as this will also ensure Singapore's long-term success and the rootedness of its people.

This big picture was painted by Mr Peter Ong, managing partner of Gallup in Singapore, Hong Kong and South-east Asia. He was a speaker at the annual Singapore Perspectives conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

The day-long event tackled four issues confronting the nation, under the theme The Heart of the Matter: Can Singaporeans afford a high-cost Singapore? Can Singaporeans remain rooted? Can Singapore preserve its hub status? Can the Government do less and Singaporeans do more? The audience of 630 came from policy circles, academia, business and other sectors.

Mr Ong noted that Singapore aces six of Gallup's global indices: law and order, national institutions, youth development, food and shelter, community basics, and personal health. But it fell short on six others: the work, personal economics, positive experience, thriving, diversity and optimism indices.

'If we can nail these areas - where we are already in the top one-third of all countries polled by Gallup - Singapore will be second to none where businesses and talent, foreign or home-grown, will find most engaging to live, work, play and, most importantly, achieve,' he said.

The current economic downturn could be the best moment to release these inner reservoirs of optimism and compassion, he suggested. This would make Singapore 'the best home for all'.

The concept of home and rootedness was also discussed by a pair of delightfully different panellists from the National University of Singapore. Lawyer-playwright Eleanor Wong constructed playful narratives while sociologist Tan Ern Ser wielded analyses - with both enjoying chemistry with the audience.

Associate Professor Wong of the law faculty suggested that Singapore's narrative of rootedness is an 'emperor's story' that would be meaningless if there were no subjects to rule over.

Her remarks recall the emotional debates on Singaporeans heading overseas, which occurred in 2002 when then prime minister Goh Chok Tong talked about 'stayers' and 'quitters'.

Prof Wong, always contrarian, rather liked the fact that 'my emperor believes in the emperor story'. It keeps the Government 'stressed out' about keeping citizens happy, she declared, leaving people like her free to live a happy, principled and contributing life.

Like her, Associate Professor Tan of the sociology department had intriguing posers. For instance: Is Singapore an economy or a nation?

The official message often appears to be: Singapore is first an economy, then a nation and community.

The official insistence on meritocracy and self-reliance percolates into Singaporean minds as: 'You have to depend on yourself.' Such thinking can cut off the roots, he suggested, as people feel loyalty to a nation, not to an economy.

A lively sub-topic within the discussion on rootedness was one on foreign talent and labour. This resonated with an audience that included global Singaporeans and foreigners working here, such as Philippine-born Astrid Tuminez, a Russian scholar at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

She commented to The Straits Times that even among labourers and domestic helpers, there is talent. She asked: Can we identify those who can become good citizens and owners of the Singapore Dream?

In the United States, immigrant labour endlessly reinvigorates the country and engenders its next generation of achievers. True, the US is a vast land that absorbs millions of immigrants - but Singapore too can value the new hunger that outsiders of all levels bring.

If there was one gap yesterday - articulated by candid IPS director Ong Keng Yong himself - it was the absence of 'fireworks', especially during the final panel session that asked if the Government should do less, while Singaporeans do more. Perhaps that is because the issue needs further exploration, in contrast to the much-dissected issue of rootedness.

But at least the audience was unambiguous on this. In an instant audience poll, the IPS found 81.68 per cent on the side of the Government doing less. Only 18.32 per cent disagreed. A nation often tagged as the nanny state can decide if this is good for the soul.

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