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**SPEECH BY MR TEO CHEE HEAN, MINISTER FOR DEFENCE AND  
MINISTER IN CHARGE OF THE CIVIL SERVICE,  
AT THE PS21 STAR SERVICE AWARD CEREMONY 2006  
ON 10 FEB 2006 AT 6 PM AT SUPREME COURT AUDITORIUM**

Good evening ladies and gentlemen,

Tonight we honour our Public Service Stars and recognise our colleagues who have gone the extra mile in an exemplary way to provide good service to the public. Not only are our award winners here, I am glad that their families, and supervisors are also here. And that is as it should be, for behind every successful person, is always another champion, cheering him or her on. What is even more gratifying is that members of the public who have benefited from the excellent service of our award winners have also been invited.

### **Challenging times**

3 The public service in Singapore plays a key role in the lives of Singaporeans and in the competitiveness of our economy. Through the work that it does, the public service provides infrastructure, homes, education, law and order and defence, and creates the right environment for our people to earn a good living, raise a family and lead a fulfilling life.

4 The delivery of public services has to go beyond efficiency and effectiveness. The quality of public service is an important part of the equation in the global competition for business and investments. Not only do citizens, tourists and businesses compare our public service delivery with what they receive overseas, they also compare the quality of government services with what they receive in the private sector. What was considered good in the past may not be satisfactory today. What was considered fast may now be considered much too slow.

5 I am happy to report that the Singapore Public Service has been innovating and adapting to meet these changing needs and expectations. Our staff know that it is no longer adequate to have one-size-fits-all solutions. We now look for innovative and customer-oriented solutions to meet the diverse and sophisticated needs of Singaporeans, visitors and businesses. Public Service officers know that they cannot think only in terms of administrative expediency and efficiency. We now look at service from the customer and citizen perspectives and seek to delight the public whom we serve.

### **Quality Service - Key Tenet of the PS21 Movement**

6 In the past ten years the public service has made a concerted effort to change the way public service is delivered, and the effort continues. The Public Service for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century movement, or PS21, launched in 1995, has been instrumental in improving the quality of our services. If you think about the way government services were typically delivered 10 years ago, and the way

government services are delivered today, I think it is not an exaggeration to say that there has been a sea change.

7 Ten years ago, if you wanted to apply for a permit to use a BBQ pit in say, East Coast Park, you would have had to travel in-person to the operator in East Coast Park to make the selection. Today, the selection and application is done through the many AXS machines around and confirmation is immediate. A decade ago, companies submitting their building plans would have gone through the lengthy process of transacting with 12 public agencies before the Building and Construction Authority granted the approval. Now, the application is online and it actually saves each company more than \$400 in terms of reduced dispatch and travelling costs.

8 The Public Service, however, faces unique challenges that are not found in the private sector. It is often the only supplier of that service which it provides. On the other hand, while companies can choose which sector of the market they want to compete in, the public service cannot choose our customers. We need to serve the needs of all members of the public. Also, due to the very role of government, we frequently have to say 'no' or impose penalties to protect the larger public good. One challenge public officers face is how to be flexible, helpful and reasonable to the individual, while maintaining impartiality and fairness to all.

9 Another challenge is the need to facilitate convenience for the vast majority of law abiding citizens, while effectively dealing with the few who may act against the public good. Even if we succeed in doing this, we have to accept that it is difficult for us to make all our

customers happy, all the time. Offenders, whether drink drivers, illegal over-stayers or companies flouting safety standards, are rarely delighted by enforcement services, no matter how professionally delivered.

10 PS21 is always about finding ways to serve Singapore and Singaporeans better. Even the IRAS seeks to make paying taxes as pleasant a civic duty as possible. And indeed, e-filing and the vastly simplified Form B have gone a long way to taking the pain out of filing our taxes!

11 Many foreigners and overseas Singaporeans I have spoken to, are impressed with the level of government services in Singapore. Where long queues and repeat visits were the norm in the past, and indeed are still the norm in many countries, we now have more than 1,600 government services available electronically 24/7, from anywhere in the world. In fact, Singapore was ranked 1<sup>st</sup> in the World Economic Forum's Global IT Report for year 2004 to 2005. And while there will always be room for improvement, I am happy to note that citizens and businesses are coming forward to commend public officers for making their day. This is good progress indeed.

### **Principles of Quality Service for the Public Sector**

12 Service quality is now recognised as a distinct competitive advantage in drawing people, businesses and investments to Singapore. With this in mind, the government helped to kick start the Go-the-Extra-Mile-for-Service Movement (GEMS), to raise

service levels and inculcate a culture of service excellence in Singapore. The message of quality service is relevant for both the private and public sectors, as both play critical roles in ensuring that Singapore holds its own in the face of stiff global competition.

13 What makes for excellent government service? While new approaches and technologies can enhance quality service, I believe there are some basic principles that can guide us in our service journey.

### **Responsiveness and Convenience**

14 First, appreciating that time is precious to customers and citizens. A big part of quality service is about delivering the greatest possible convenience to our customers. With the fast pace of life, the public appreciates speed and convenience when transacting with the government. To the customer, time is money. The faster they can get in touch with us and the faster we can serve them, the more cost we save them – they do not have to make multiple visits or even a visit to complete the transaction; they do not have to take leave from work.

15 The Public Service has embarked on process re-engineering to ensure that transaction times are shortened. Technology is also keenly exploited to cut down processing times. The time taken to incorporate a new company, for example, has been cut from 5 days to 15 minutes. The passport application process has been streamlined from 7 days, with 2 counter visits, to 3 days and 1

counter visit. I am confident that these improvements are much appreciated by the public.

### **Customer Friendly Forms**

16 I am glad to inform you that to make transacting with the government easier, the public service is embarking on a new initiative to review all forms and simplify them wherever possible. We call this the Customer Friendly Form Initiative. Under this initiative, all public agencies are committed to putting in place processes and systems to review all their forms regularly, so that the forms are easily available, easy to understand, and easy to fill in.

17 As a first step, all public agencies have committed to stating the estimated time needed to complete a form at the beginning of each form. This encourages the agency to take a critical look at the information they are asking for and to reduce that to the minimum. Significant pieces of information required will also be stated upfront, so that members of the public can get hold of the information required before they start filling in the form. These steps put the onus on public agencies to streamline their forms as much as possible. This initiative will be put in place by April this year.

### **Many Agencies, One Government**

18 The second principle is to provide comprehensive and integrated services as far as possible, so that the public does not have to deal with several different agencies in a related transaction.

The public service has 15 ministries and more than 65 Statutory Boards. These agencies, for reasons of accountability, have clear lines of responsibility. However, many issues today cut across agency lines. Customer needs increasingly require a multi-agency response. Although the public service has many agencies, we must transact with the public as one government.

19 The Online Business Licensing Service, or OBLS, which won the United Nations Public Service Award in 2005, is a prime example of how more than 30 government agencies have worked together to provide integrated, one-stop solutions, in the area of application, update, renewal and termination of business licenses.

20 In the 2 years since the launch of this Service in January 2004, more than 22,000 businesses have been served by it. Processing time for license applications has been reduced from an average of 21 days to 8 days – a significant 65% reduction, not to mention the convenience that the one-stop portal provides, compared to the time when businesses had to approach each and every public agency separately for every license application. In one year, the monthly's transaction volume for the OBLS has jumped more than 7-fold, from about 750 applications a month in Dec 2004 to about 5,700 applications in Dec 2005. The provision of integrated services, guided by the vision of 'Many Agencies One Government', is clearly valued by the businesses.

21 The TradeXchange project announced by the Singapore Customs last month is another example of integrated services. The project is to create a single platform which supports seamless

exchange of information among regulators, shippers, traders and other players in the logistics supply chain. TradeXchange will be launched by Oct 2007 and is projected to save \$75 million for the entire industry over 10 years in terms of trade permit declaration cost. The Public Service will continue to explore opportunities to deliver services owned by different public agencies, in an integrated and convenient manner.

### **Nurturing and Recognising Service Champions**

22 The third principle in providing quality public services, is the importance of developing our service staff. While systems and processes are important, we must not forget that we still need people, especially for the non routine transactions, to go the extra mile to find solutions meaningful to customers and citizens. In many cases, it is the passion and commitment of our service officers that have made a difference for our customers. The recruitment of service staff with the right values and aptitude and the availability of quality training are instrumental in building the capacity to provide quality service. The policy of 100 training hours a year and the suite of customer service courses provided by the Civil Service College, have put the public service in good stead to continuously raise the bar on service quality.

### **Winners all**

23 Having witnessed the change in public services over the past 10 years, I know that the Singapore Public Service will continue to improve and seek to be a leader and standard bearer for quality



service. It is in this context that we honour our 77 colleagues chosen from 120,000 officers for their “Star” factor in providing service. And among these 77 Stars are our Distinguished Stars, five of them, selected by a panel of distinguished private sector judges from the GEMS committee.

24 When I learnt of the good deeds by these Stars, I felt a deep sense of pride in our Public Service.

- Take, for example, Mrs Soh-Tan Bee Eng, an officer of some 32 years of service from the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports. Through her persistent desire to help an old lady suffering from dementia, she tracked down her identity and reunited her with her family.
- The same sense of service distinguishes Ms Chor Swee Chin, who, as a library officer, did not hesitate to traverse the island to deliver materials to teachers who needed them.
- While enforcing road safety rules, Sergeant Helmi Amri Bin Mustafah showed compassion when he met an offender rushing to the hospital for a medical emergency. He even escorted him to his destination.
- As a HDB officer, Ms Velvet Ng went to great lengths to ensure that her customer’s sale transaction went through quickly so that he could receive the proceeds which he

needed to pay for medical treatment. She personally delivered the documents to the sick customer's home.

- Mr Eric Soo went the extra mile to make sure that his student, who was paralysed, could realise his dream of graduating with a diploma. Mr Soo gave him special tuition sessions, even repackaged a study module and designed new assessment methods, just to help his student achieve the required standards and pass that all important examination.

25 There are many other public officers, including our other Star Service Award winners today, who have also shown extraordinary commitment to serve Singapore and Singaporeans to the best of their ability. It is indeed an honour for me to present them the awards that they so rightly deserve.

## **Conclusion**

26 The Singapore Public Service is internationally recognised as one of the best public services in the world. With the strong commitment to serve Singapore and Singaporeans with excellence and integrity, I am sure that the Public Service will continue to play a critical role in nation building.

27 Let me once again congratulate all Star Service Award winners. Not only have you done us proud, you are also an inspiration to us all.

Thank you.