

**INAUGURAL LECTURE
CHIEF SECRETARY FORUM (KUALA LUMPUR)
BY MR PETER ONG
HEAD, CIVIL SERVICE
REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE
30 NOVEMBER 2011
'BUILDING AN ADAPTIVE PUBLIC SERVICE'**

Good Afternoon

Tan Sri Mohd. Sidek Hassan, Chief Secretary to the Government of Malaysia

Dr Hamidin Abd Hamid, CEO Razak School of Government

Ladies and Gentlemen

INTRODUCTION

1. I am truly honoured to be invited to speak at this Inaugural Chief Secretary Lecture. When my good friend and colleague, Tan Sri Mohd. Sidek approached me, I was initially hesitant. The Singapore Public Service is much smaller and less complex compared to your civil service. Certainly, some of our experiences as a city-state would not be directly transferable to your context of a federal, state and local government system.
2. The Singapore Public Service had the privilege of hearing Tan Sri's views when he spoke as our Civil Service College Distinguished Speaker in February last year. We were able to distil many important lessons from his views on the challenges that the Malaysian Civil Service faced. Hence, I accepted Tan Sri's invitation as I view this lecture as a continuation of the discourse between our two Civil Services. There is value in this exchange of insights on what are needed to build a public service that is responsive to the needs of our citizens, and that embraces the wider global trends like globalisation, technology and shifting geo-strategic developments. In short, we both face the common challenge of building an adaptive public service that will prepare us for the future.
3. We certainly do not have all the answers to the challenges we face in our respective public services. In fact, in today's fast-paced, changing world where tomorrow can be radically different from today, we may not be able to hold on to established approaches that worked well in the past, but which may not be as appropriate or relevant going forward.
4. If we think about it, a mere 15 years ago, the internet was only just being introduced to the world. And about six years ago, Facebook was virtually unknown.
5. Today, you can speak to your phone, and it talks back to you. With the iPhone 4S, you can ask a question and Siri will have a response. In this slide, Siri is responding to a question about Women. And here, the response to the request to call for an ambulance is not quite what was expected. But, I am sure it is only a matter of time

before Siri will be able to call the ambulance and even direct the ambulance to the site of the accident all on its own. And who knows, in a matter of time, Siri could be the one sending the appeal to the Road Transport Department (JPJ) or Town Councils for the parking *saman*.

6. In this new world of pervasive change, uncertainties and complexity, how do we prepare our civil service so that we are always able and ready to address the challenges that come our way?

A COMPLEX WORLD, A CHANGING SINGAPORE

7. As a small country with an open economy, Singapore faces an increasingly challenging global environment. The Eurozone financial situation continues to unfold, with increasing uncertainty surrounding not just Greece, but larger Eurozone countries like Spain and Italy. Just this month, US President Barack Obama announced that the Asia Pacific is key to the future and the US will station more troops in Australia.
8. Following the Arab Spring uprisings in the Middle East, the world watched Colonel Gaddafi's regime in Libya being overthrown. We also watched as the Occupy Wall Street movement and its spinoffs unfold simultaneously around the world. Tan Sri Sidek reminded me recently that even Einstein's Law of Relativity, which many scientists have taken for granted, is now being challenged.
9. I am not sure if this is the result of the sentimentality of growing older, but when I joined the public service, public policy issues seemed more straightforward. Our priorities were clear. First and foremost, we needed to meet Singaporean's basic needs such as ensuring security, providing jobs, decent public housing and basic education.
10. I was told by my superiors to analyse the issues systematically, emulate best practices from developed countries, and find pragmatic solutions that we could sustain financially. If you did these three things well, you would be fine.
11. However, things are not quite as straightforward today. In Singapore, not only do our public officers grapple with the wider global forces, we are also seeing the very nature of the relationship between the State and the citizen change. Today, our citizens are asking for a different type of relationship with government. Singaporeans are telling the government that they want to be heard and they want, more than ever before, to be included in shaping Singapore's future. We welcome our citizens' call for better engagement and inclusion. But is the Singapore Public Service ready for this change? Will we be able to live up to Singaporeans' expectations? Our response to these challenges will determine if we can be an adaptive public service worthy of Singapore and Singaporeans.

A PUBLIC SERVICE WORTHY OF SINGAPORE: READY FOR CHANGE AND READY TO CHANGE

12. It was for the reason that the Singapore public service needed to change in time for the future and to adapt that we launched our mass movement for change in 1995, called Public Service for the 21st Century, or PS21.

The PS21 Movement

13. With the theme of “Being in Time for the Future”, the PS21 movement sought to transform the Singapore Public Service to (i) Anticipate Change, (ii) Welcome Change and (iii) Execute Change.

14. We believed that to sustain such large scale change management in bureaucracies, we needed grassroots initiatives that are driven bottom-up, generated by the enthusiasm, momentum and stamina of people on the ground. Put very simply, everyone at every level should be imbued with the belief that “Everyone is an Activist for Change”.

The Evolution of PS21

15. To do this, we focused PS21 on four functional areas:

- i. **Excellence through Continuous Enterprise and Learning (or ExCEL)** focused on encouraging officers to contribute ideas that could improve processes or service delivery in their respective areas of work. Its key initiatives included the Staff Suggestion Scheme (SSS), Work Improvement Teams (WITS) and the training of public officers.
- ii. **Organisational Review** referred to the transformation of the Singapore Public Service through structural and strategic innovations. This included the streamlining of procedures, cutting red-tape, and applying information technology and management tools.
- iii. **Quality Service** meant delighting customers. This was a commitment to Courtesy, Accessibility, Responsiveness and Effectiveness (or CARE for short) in the delivery of services to the public as well as to fellow public officers who rely on collaboration within the Civil Service to perform their duties well.
- iv. **Staff Well-being**, which included looking after, energising and engaging staff so that they felt valued for their contributions, as well as prepared and committed to do their best.

16. While some of these activities I've just described were already being practised from the early 1980s as part of our National Productivity movement, they were never organised for a broad reach or extensive participation for the entire Civil Service. Getting PS21 going, as you can imagine, was no easy feat. For example, quality service and the notion of delighting customers were quite foreign concepts. We all

know that unlike in the private sector, the public service is a monopoly. If a citizen is dissatisfied with our passport application process, he or she cannot just find another service provider.

17. Hence, it took some convincing to let our staff understand that we needed to approach public service from a new standpoint.
18. So to encourage public officers to generate ideas to improve the way they worked, we mandated that everyone should achieve a target of four suggestions a year and participate in at least one Work Improvement Team project.
19. These processes were useful. They got officers into the practice of always thinking about how they can do their work better. It also led to a blossoming of good ideas for implementation. As a recent example, an officer from the National Environment Agency, whom I recently gave an award to, asked himself whether a miniature microscope which jewellers use to examine the authenticity of gems, could be used to identify mosquito larvae. He was on a fight against dengue. He and his colleagues went on to modify a microscope which allowed it to be attached to a camera phone, something that all of us would have. With that innovation, officers can take a picture of these larva samples using their smart phones through the microscope attached. They send the photos back to the office for identification without having to store and transport any samples back. This frees up officers' time to deploy more mosquito traps around the housing estates. This idea led to a 46% productivity gain. This simple, but inspired, innovation is an example of how PS21 has been able to encourage our officers to innovate within their own functional areas of work.
20. Nasir, from the NEA, is an example of a change agent. We hope for many more like him in the Singapore Public Service to help us realise the vision of an exceptional Public Service.
21. Despite the many successes, we found that after some time, the PS21 processes took on a life of their own, one that we had never intended. For example, to ensure that we took SSS and WITS seriously, we required ministries and agencies to rigorously track the statistics, such as the number of suggestions submitted per month. An exercise that was meant to encourage turned into a perceived policing exercise. The target of four suggestions became an end in itself and not a means to an end, which is innovation.
22. On top of this, the numerous programmes and initiatives that arose out of PS21 created some confusion. For example, PS21 began associated with initiatives such as the Cut Red Tape movement, Pro-enterprise Panel, Zero-in Panel which all aimed to remove unnecessary red-tape, rules and regulations.
23. Hence, in 2008, we took the opportunity to review, reflect and refresh the movement. Although the movement had undergone previous changes, in terms of the committees and structure which supported it, the review in 2008 signalled a philosophical change in its approach in three areas:

- **First, PS21 is about Change and Innovation-** PS21 seeks to harness the creativity and diversity of the Public Service, reinforce the spirit of continuous improvement, experiment with new ideas, and make training and learning a way of life for our officers.
- **Second, everyone is an Agent of Change-** While every public officer was to continue being actively involved in change, we de-emphasised the collation of statistics concerning SSS and WITS. Instead, we emphasised that improvements can be both big and small, and can take place in both policy and operational functions. On top of this, they can be proposed and executed by both individuals or groups and, most importantly, can touch on any area of work.
- **Third, PS21 builds a Public Service Worthy of Singapore-** The future calls for a Public Service that is responsive, flexible and innovative. We believe that such a public service would help to maintain Singapore's competitive advantage and contribute directly to the success of Singapore.

24. These changes meant a PS21 movement driven less from the centre, but more from the level where it works best- the ministry or agency level. So rather than the prescriptive approach when the movement started, Permanent Secretaries or CEOs could work out what his/her priorities are, and what he/she wants PS21 to achieve for the organisation.

25. This, in turn, meant changing the way we measured PS21. Instead of continuing with statistics collation, agencies were instead asked to submit qualitative reports on the state of PS21 so that we can still assess the health of the organisation centrally.

26. The only way any movement, more importantly a change movement, can continue to stay relevant is if it constantly refreshes itself to adapt to the changing environment. Hence, PS21 today is quite different from when it was launched 16 years ago. But one thing is clear – while the form and manifestations of PS21 have evolved over time, the spirit of embracing change in preparation for the future remains the cornerstone of PS21.

27. Looking forward, what then are the necessary adaptations to such a mass movement that is itself dedicated to change? I believe that the key driving force will, indeed, be the changes in the citizenry we serve – our own people; their profile and aspirations, and these in turn will change the nature of the relationship between State and citizens. The Singapore Public Service will need to re-think the way we formulate and implement policies and deliver public services in three key areas: (i) the need for greater public engagement, (ii) the need to formulate policies and deliver public services with more empathy and (iii) the need to keep preparing for the uncertain and unpredictable future.

- **Greater Public Engagement-** As I mentioned earlier, Singapore citizens are calling for better engagement and for government to be more inclusive. The truth of the matter is that the government does not have a monopoly of ideas; and if policies are co-created through active participation of the citizenry, it will

generate more buy-in and ownership from the ground. Hence, our public officers must be willing to seek more diverse views from people from all walks of life and seize the opportunity to collaborate to generate ideas and potential solutions.

Obviously, not all policies are amenable for public engagement and we should have the wisdom to do what we can in areas that will benefit from such engagement.

- **Policy Formulation and Service Delivery with More Empathy-** The Singapore Public Service is known for its pragmatism. We are very familiar with crafting policies using our heads. But I believe there is room for us, in the Singapore Public Service, to formulate and implement policies with more heart, or more from the citizen's perspective, rather than from the perspective of the agency implementing the policy.

'Service Delivery with More Empathy' may thus require us to move away from a "one-size-fits-all" approach, which leaves no doubt that we are impartial and fair in our dealings, to one where we seek to cater to the growing diversity of the population and the specific circumstances of individuals.

- **Preparing for Uncertain and Unpredictable Future-** This remains an enduring theme of PS21. The Public Service must anticipate and prepare for emerging risks and opportunities that stem from both global forces and local trends. We need to think about the challenges that Singapore could face in the longer-term, and develop policy options in advance, so that we can move decisively and effectively when we need to.

THE LEADERSHIP IMPERATIVE

28. Any successful change management story will not be complete without underscoring the imperative for strong leadership.
29. A strong and effective public service requires strong and effective leadership. However, it is in this new era of complexity and uncertainty that the role of leaders at all levels within the public service becomes even more crucial.
30. There is an urgent need to groom current and future generations of leaders to follow in the same purpose and direction. Hence, we are constantly trying out new ways to identify, engage and groom the younger generation to become future leaders of the Public Service. Let me share with you four key areas of how we are doing so.
31. First, we **promote developmental relationships**. We create opportunities for senior public service leaders to mentor or coach junior public service leaders. I have a personal rule of thumb that if a leader is not spending up to 30% of his time on mentoring, developing and nurturing younger officers, he is not spending enough time on the most important asset in the organisation.

32. Second, **leaders are identified** among our public officers by assessing their potential and by appraising their performance at all stages in their careers. Some of you may be aware that the Singapore Public Service uses a system where we identify the Current Estimated Potential (CEP) or the estimated grade that an officer is deemed to be able to reach at the point of retirement.
33. This system allows us to identify those officers whom we believe have the potential to fulfil senior positions early on in their career, so as to give us sufficient opportunity to plan for their development. However, it takes a lot of resources and effort on our part to familiarise ourselves with each and every officer and their work performance so that we are able to make as accurate an assessment as we can about their potential to be the leaders of the future. The appraisal process is thus a lengthy one, which requires the full commitment of the entire organisation.
34. Third, young leaders assessed with high potential are selected for **milestone training programmes** at key points in their careers. These include milestones such as when they first take on supervisory duties, when they start leading their own departments and when they take on leadership of agencies.
35. Fourth, we place strong emphasis on **leadership renewal**. To ensure that there is a constant flow of new and fresh ideas, our public sector leaders have a fixed tenure of service. Once an officer is promoted into a public sector leadership position such as Deputy Secretary, they are bound by a fixed tenure of 10 years. The underlying premise of this approach is that while there will always be a need for experience, it may be our younger leaders who will have fresher insights. It is also more likely, that they will have more current and innovative ideas to deal with issues that confront us today.
36. While this policy was implemented to stem the flow of talent out of the civil service, I believe that this renewal of leadership will be key to how Singapore will be able to adapt in this complex and uncertain new world.

Leading Organisational and Institutional Transformation

37. From developing people as individuals, I also want to move on to another equally important role for leaders, and that is to engender change in an organisation, by putting in place processes, systems and structures that will transform the organisational culture and behaviour even beyond the tenure of the leader.
38. To do this, leaders must also grasp the organisational constraints and bottlenecks that might impede change, and overcome these challenges to prepare the organisation for future challenges.
39. The Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore (or IRAS) is an example of an organisation that had benefited from leaders, at all levels, who have committed to transforming IRAS. It has since grown from strength-to-strength and now serves as a guiding pillar for the rest of the civil service.

40. Filing taxes, depending on where you come from, is really nothing to joke about. Instead it is a stressful time of trying to ensure that you have declared all your income accurately and recorded all your taxable claims and expenditures for filing. In fact, because many tax systems are very complicated, many resort to hiring professional accountants to handle their tax matters. Fortunately for us in Singapore, filing and paying taxes is a stress free activity.
41. IRAS's journey began with taxpayers' records stored in filing bays that were fenced up by ceiling-high wire mesh. It was not only the physical conditions which were in need of an overhaul. Work processes, which entailed officers ploughing through pages of records to pick up relevant items and manually calculating the tax payable in each case, also needed a revamp.
42. Given that the most important interaction with taxpayers starts with tax filing, they began questioning the way tax returns were examined and whether we could improve the tax filing process. Questioning the status quo led IRAS to review its entire work process. They first did away with the mundane processes, then started e-filing for taxpayers and subsequently made tax filing a non-event by working with employers to submit an employee's earned income directly to IRAS, starting with the biggest employer – the Singapore Civil Service.
43. The latest service innovation by IRAS is No-Filing Service. Tax-payers, whose employers are already submitting the required information to IRAS, will not even need to file taxes each year as long as they have no additional income to declare or changes to their relief claims. And if you do need to make any changes to your relief claims, these can be filed electronically.
44. As a result, IRAS, which is in an unenviable position of having customers who do not particularly relish dealing with the taxman, has managed to minimise the administrative hassle for the public through the use of technology and has kept transforming itself.

ENDURING VALUES FOR THE SINGAPORE PUBLIC SERVICE

45. Before I end this lecture, I would like to share the importance of enduring values for the Public Service. The core values of the Singapore Public Service are Integrity, Service and Excellence.
46. These values have always been the backbone of our Public Service philosophy and ethos. They are not merely slogans we shout out. We expect that our leaders lead by example and demonstrate these values regardless of the situation they are faced with. And they serve as our guiding stars during periods of change and uncertainty.
47. I've shared with you three key areas which the Singapore Public Service has focused its attention on. One was how the public service must always stay nimble and be ready to change. The second was that leaders have an obligation to develop people and to also lead institutional and organisational transformation to ensure resilience in this increasingly complex world. And third was the importance of keeping to our core values to enable us to cope in times of change and uncertainty.

48. While I feel that these areas require our present attention, I also believe that it is important for us to remind ourselves that this journey of governance we are on is and will never be easy. It is a journey which requires tremendous stamina and perseverance. The key is being adaptable.

CONCLUSION: THE POWER OF EDUCATION

49. Finally, we must never lose faith in the power of education in encouraging our leaders to stay adaptive. This is where the Razak School of Government plays a pivotal role.

50. The Razak School's intention to be a platform for dialogue, knowledge sharing and synergistic collaboration will prove to be an asset to the Malaysian public sector. It can be the incubator for many ideas for change, and an exchange for leaders to constantly come back to refresh themselves along this journey of governance.

51. I leave you with another slide showing Siri's response to a question. Siri is asked, "What is your birthday?" Its response, "I came into existence gradually".

52. In 2005, during a commencement address in Stanford, Steve Jobs shared about the time he had spent taking random classes, after formally dropping out of school. He said, "You can't connect the dots looking forward you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust in something: your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever. Because believing that the dots will connect down the road will give you the confidence to follow your heart, even when it leads you off the well worn path."^[1]

53. I'm sure the late Steve Jobs, when he had dropped out of school, would never have expected the type of impact he would have on the world. He followed his instincts and pushed himself and others to realise ideas which changed the world. While it may seem as if he had changed the world overnight, as Siri's response suggests, it wasn't the case. Instead, it took patience, perseverance and a team of people working hard over an extended period of time to realise his vision.

54. Not all of our people are going to be as enlightened or as visionary as Steve Jobs. Public Sector learning institutions such as the Razak School of Government and Civil Service College in Singapore, play an important role in helping our people to 'connect the dots'. By focusing regularly on our people, helping them to appreciate the importance for change and guiding them in little improvements every day, our Public Services would be able to achieve sustained success no matter what challenges tomorrow may bring.

END

^[1] Steve Jobs, Stanford Commencement Address, 2005.