

SPEECH BY MR TEO CHEE HEAN, MINISTER IN-CHARGE OF THE CIVIL SERVICE AT THE COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY, 1 MARCH 2006

1 The challenges facing the public service are in line with those facing Singapore. The issues confronting us today are more complex and multi-faceted. Some can strike us with immediate and potentially devastating effect, such as a pandemic flu or a terrorist attack. Others are of a longer term but critical nature which will shape our society, country and region for decades to come - education, entrepreneurship, ageing population, healthcare, falling birth rate and new regional dynamics.

2 Our citizens are better educated, more globally connected and expect a higher level of service. They also expect more avenues for expression and participation. The public service has to be responsive to these developments. It must adapt and innovate in order to create the right conditions for peace and prosperity, and help seize opportunities for Singapore.

3 Today, the public sector consists of 15 Ministries and 66 statutory boards. These agencies, for reasons of accountability, have clear lines of responsibility. However, many issues do cut across agency lines. To be effective, the public service has to think and to act as one. There must be greater inter-agency coordination, not just in policy formulation but also in implementation of policies. This is why the public service is paying much attention now to working on what we call a whole of Government approach.

4 Various mechanisms have been put in place to tackle cross-agency issues. Where inter-agency problems are due to differences in fundamental policy orientation, there is a need to review the policies themselves and decide on potential policy trade offs, if necessary. To achieve this, we have set up inter-Ministry committees and project teams to carry out reviews. Examples of such high-level panels are the National Population Committee, the Ministerial Committee on Low Wage Workers and the Committee on Ageing Issues - the last two having recently released their recommendations. Much dialogue and collaboration between agencies happen with these committees which draw on public, private and people sector expertise.

5 We have also created new platforms to sensitise senior public officials to national imperatives and to build a common understanding of the challenges and issues facing Singapore. Managers are also put through milestone courses in the Civil Service College to attune them to cross-agency issues and national considerations so as to increase their capacity to think beyond their departmental work.

6 Besides addressing issues at the policy level, the public service has also set up similar mechanisms at the operational and implementation level to bring public officers together to resolve operational and service-related issues. One such mechanism, as Mr Wee has pointed out, is the Zero-In-Process, which he has requested for an update.

7 The Zero-In-Process Panel (ZIP Panel) was started in 2000. It is a mechanism in the public service to identify and resolve issues faced by members of

the public that cut across public agency boundaries. Issues are typically identified through feedback from members of the public. All issues surfaced are addressed. Where appropriate, they will be channelled to the ZIP Panel, which is chaired by the Permanent Secretary of the Prime Minister's Office. If the issue is complex, the ZIP Panel may even commission study teams to look into the issue and make recommendations for its consideration.

8 Since 2000, the ZIP Panel has identified more than 110 cases for action, with 22 inter-agency teams formed to tackle how the more complex cases can be resolved. For example, the ZIP Panel implemented the no-wrong-door policy in 2004. This policy requires all public officers to put a member of the public in touch with the right agency for help. This has enabled citizens and businesses to get in touch with the right agencies more quickly, instead of being given a run-around.

9 As another example, organisers had to apply for many licences needed to hold community events, concerts, sporting events or exhibitions. As a result of one such specific case that was brought to the ZIP Panel's attention in 2005, a project team was convened to look into the matter. The project team helped to identify the typical licences and permits needed to hold events and made these available to the one-stop on-line business licensing service. This can be done now on this on-line service.

10 Apart from the Zero-In-Process, there are other mechanisms to resolve inter-agency issues. The Pro-Enterprise Panel has so far reviewed close to 1,500 suggestions, some of which also involved more than one public agency. Besides responding to public feedback, the public service proactively re-engineers processes

to deliver integrated e-services. The on-line business licensing service is a prime example of how more than 30 Government agencies have worked together

11 to provide an integrated one-stop solution in the area of application, update, renewal and termination of business licences. As a result of process re-engineering, the time taken, for example, to incorporate a new company has been cut from five days to 15 minutes. Since the launch of the on-line business licensing service two years ago in 2004, more than 28,000 businesses have benefited from it. The public service strives to function as many agencies, one Government. Notwithstanding the achievement, there will always be cases where we can do better. Citizens and businesses who face problems with inter-agency coordination can surface this for attention at the PS21 website.

12 Sir, to have a first-class public service, it is crucial for the public sector to attract a fair share of Singapore's most able people. Government scholarships are important as they are key source of talent to build capable public sector leadership. I would like to assure Prof. Ivan Png that the public sector is careful not to take in more scholars than we need. For the past few years, the total number of Public Service Commission and statutory board scholarships awarded had been kept relatively constant, at an annual average of about 300. For the year 2005, 249 scholarships, 93 in the civil service and 156 from the statutory boards were awarded. This is not a large number, considering that the public service, the Armed Forces and the Home Team have many challenging and demanding jobs that require very good people. It is also not a large number compared to the approximately 12,000 students a year graduating with 'A' level, or approximately 2,800 a year with three 'A' grades or more at their 'A' levels. If there were not

sufficient people of high ability in the public service, we would not be able to have the quality and integrity that has become the hallmark of the Singapore Public Service which is recognised, not just in Singapore, but internationally, and we would not have the quality of a public service that the people of Singapore expect.

13 Students have a choice of whether to apply for a Government scholarship. If they do, they should be aware of the obligations and be ready to commit themselves to a public service career. For those who are not sure if they are suited to a public service career, they can pursue their university education on their own first and then decide on a career after graduation. And the public sector welcomes these individuals to join us if they wish to do so later on.

14 Prof. Png also asked how many of the scholars achieved Superscale grade or Colonel grade at the end of their bond. The bond today is six years and it will be quite an achievement if they do achieve Colonel grade or Superscale grade at the end of just six years of service. But many of them do stay on longer in their career, do achieve these grades and reach the highest ranks in the Armed Forces and civil service. That is precisely why we have taken them in. If we did not have such able people joining the civil service, committing and dedicating themselves to the profession, we would not have a constant flow of people, the refresh of people that is required in the service to have at the end of a 15-, 20-, 25-year career - people who can rise to the top and lead these very important organisations.

15 Government scholars are sent to both local and overseas universities. The PSC awards the prestigious Local-Overseas Merit Scholarships which are on par with Overseas Merit Scholarships for an undergraduate education in Singapore with

the opportunity to do a masters programme overseas. PSC also sends scholars to top overseas universities in countries like the US, UK, PRC, France, Germany and Japan. Experiencing what the best foreign universities can offer and being exposed to diverse perspectives is good for the public service. We do not want a public service which has been brought up only within Singapore. I think that would not be very good for us.

16 To keep overseas scholars rooted to Singapore, the PSC brings them back after two years of study to attend a mid-course programme and to undergo a six to eight-week attachment in a public service agency. PSC scholars studying overseas can also choose to do their masters locally. Overall, the scholarship schemes have worked well. A vast majority of scholars adapt well to their working environment and live up to the high expectations demanded of them. Those who leave the public sector after working for some years generally still contribute to Singapore in one way or another at large.

17 On Prof. Png's concern about morale in the service, I assure him that scholars are not automatically placed on a career fast track. I wish all of them could become enormous successes because we have great hopes for them when they join us. But we do assess them on their performance and potential rigorously when they are in the service compared to all other officers in the service and only if they do well, do they progress. They must prove their worth and demonstrate aptitude and ability before they are promoted. The public service values and rewards talent, whether they be scholars or non-scholars. And it certainly would be our loss to neglect talented non-scholars in the service.

18 Sir, let me now move on to an issue of national concern which Mdm Halimah Yacob has touched on - the employability and employment of older workers. Mr Yeo Guat Kwang and Mr Loh Meng See touched on this yesterday as well. Mdm Halimah has focused on those who are aged 62 and above. I should say that the public sector looks at older workers, not just focusing on this age group, which has specific issues regarding them. But we also look at older workers in general, and we look at workers who are above 40 years of age and see how we can make them more welcome in the public service as well.

19 The public sector does welcome older workers who have the skills, experience and passion. The public sector has a diverse workforce, comprising both younger and older workers with different strengths and talent to build an effective and efficient service. Recruitment is based on merit. The public sector employs a candidate who best fits the job requirements regardless of age, gender or race. Currently, about 39% of public officers are above 40 years old and 17% are above 50 years old. On average, about 15% of the new hires each year are older workers above the age of 40. Between 2002 and 2004, the public sector has recruited more than 2,800 such older workers.

20 Public sector agencies are free to employ retired officers if these officers wish to continue working and where the agencies have a need for their expertise. Over the past few years, more than 800 officers have been re-employed. This number does not include retirees who are employed on casual terms or on short term, ad hoc projects. The re-employed officers are in a diverse range of jobs, for example, retired teachers are re-employed as adjunct teachers and school counsellors. In the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority, retired officers are re-employed to maintain

experimental farms and control stray animals. The Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports employs retired SAF and Singapore Police Force officers to undertake operational duties in the juvenile homes. And the Public Utilities Board re-employs about 100 retired staff mostly in the technical fields. So retired officers are being re-employed in the service.

21 As a large employer, the public sector has a role in addressing this national concern of employment of older workers. I believe that we can do better without compromising our ability to deliver cost-efficient public service. The Public Service Division will step up efforts to re-orientate the attitude of public agencies towards the employment of older workers. In December last year, we organised a seminar to raise awareness among public sector HR practitioners on this issue and will continue to promote sharing and best practices among the agencies. But PSC recognises that its efforts cannot stop here. It has therefore also engaged Ministries and statutory boards to identify and open up more job opportunities for older workers, and these could also be people who are not directly employed by the public sector. But these could be jobs created in the public sector. For example, the Ministry of Education has worked with private sector companies to provide more than 600 security guards for deployment in schools, and many of these positions will be taken up by older workers.

22 Public sector agencies will also be strongly encouraged to tap on WDA's ADVANTAGE Scheme, to redesign jobs and retrain the older employees. The response from some agencies has been encouraging. We will work with Ministries

and statutory boards to create more flexible avenues to re-employ older workers. Although the public sector is not setting hard targets for the employment of older workers, we will be monitoring the progress of public sector agencies closely.

23 Finally, let me close with good news for Ms Indranee Rajah. The civil service supports the movement to give ex-offenders a second chance. As far back as 2000, Ministries have started to employ ex-offenders taking into consideration the type of offences and the nature of the job. We will take the additional step. The civil service will amend the job application form to ask applicants to declare if they have criminal records in Singapore, instead of whether they have ever been convicted in court. Candidates with spent records can now indicate that they do not have any criminal record. The new forms will take effect on 1st April this year. Ministries will work with the statutory boards under their charge to implement similar application forms by the second quarter of 2006.

24 Sir, a clean and efficient public service is the foundation for good governance in Singapore. The service will continue to strive to live up to its core values of integrity, service and excellence. It believes in continuously challenging itself to excel so that it can function effectively to serve Singaporeans better. As an employer, the service will also ensure that its human resource practices are progressive, responsive and flexible. With this, we will have a first-class public service worthy of Singapore.