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SPEECH BY MR WONG KAN SENG, DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AND MINISTER FOR HOME AFFAIRS, AT THE 2008 ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICE DINNER AND PROMOTION CEREMONY, 19 MARCH 2008, 7.30 PM AT GRAND COPTHORNE WATERFRONT HOTEL

Mr Peter Ho, Head of the Civil Service

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

INTRODUCTION

Let me begin by congratulating all the officers who have been promoted or who have been confirmed or absorbed into the Administrative Service, and those who have been appointed to the Management Associates Programme.

Tribute to Retired Permanent Secretary - Dr Tan Chin Nam

2 I would like to also use this occasion to acknowledge the contributions of Dr Tan Chin Nam, the former Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts. Chin Nam, who retired from the Administrative

Service in December last year, served in the Public Service for 33 years.

3 As the then National Computer Board Chairman from 1987 to 1994, and concurrently, as the Managing Director of the Economic Development Board, Chin Nam was a pioneering leader in the early efforts to develop the Information Technology industry in Singapore. Today, the Singapore Public Service is at the forefront in e-services, effectively using IT in administration and service delivery.

4 As the Permanent Secretary of MICA, Chin Nam played a key role in developing the creative and media industries. He was responsible for the National Marketing initiative and raising the profile of Singapore through the Singapore Season in London and China. I am glad to note that although Chin Nam has retired, he has agreed to continue to serve as the Chairman of the Media Development Authority, and share his considerable experience and expertise.

A GOOD PUBLIC SERVICE IS KEY TO GOOD GOVERNANCE

5 Singapore today operates in an inter-connected, interdependent, complex and highly globalised environment. This poses challenges to us in terms of how we need to re-engineer so as to compete effectively and to prosper. Our society will invariably continue to undergo significant changes, both from internal and external sources. For instance, as we attract foreign talent in order to grow economically, we will not only have more foreigners among us but also more foreigners becoming part of us, the Singapore citizenry. Most come into the Singapore family as adults, with reflexes and values already formed and socialised by a different society. How do we adjust to such a social and cultural infusion into our mainstream society? How will policies be adjusted so that the needs and expectations of new citizens and those of the larger Singapore community can be harmonized?

6 At a similar occasion last year, PM spoke about the importance of good governance in a rapidly changing world.

Indeed, under-pinning whether Singapore will succeed in the face of daunting new challenges is good and effective governance.

7 The Public Service is a vital part of the living infrastructure for good governance. Political leaders have the electoral mandate to govern and set policies. The Public Service plays a crucial role to operationalise them. The best of policy intentions and ideas count for little if there is bad implementation.

Update on Talent Attraction and Retention

8 In building a good Public Service, we must compete to attract and retain employees of high calibre and motivation. Over the past year, the Service has made progress in this respect. The Civil Service has systematically reviewed many of its service schemes, including the Management Executive Scheme, Education Service, Legal Service, and Home Uniformed Service, to name a few. These adjustments were made to align public service remuneration with their respective

market equivalents so as to maintain the overall competitiveness of the public service.

9 For the Administrative Service, salary adjustments were made in two steps, once in April last year, and more recently, in January 2008. The adjustments have enabled the Service to close the gap with the market benchmarks - 77% for the Ministerial Grade benchmark and 100% for the entry Superscale Grade benchmark. These adjustments allowed the link between performance and remuneration to be strengthened. As much as 50% of the annual salary of a senior civil servant is now variable, depending on his own performance and the performance of the Singapore economy.

10 More efforts are being made to reward and recognise officers throughout the Public Service according to their responsibilities and contributions. All these changes are aimed at giving our officers more attractive careers, developmental opportunities and competitive remuneration packages. Officers are also offered more challenging

assignments and projects, and there are Service-wide job posting opportunities, both within and outside their organisations. The government will continue to ensure that public service salaries remain competitive with the market.

CAPACITIES FOR THE PUBLIC SERVICE

11 To deliver good governance, apart from recruiting high calibre people, we need first rate organisations which can nimbly adjust to new challenges. I would like to talk about the need to develop certain organisational capacities which will be critical in a more complex external and domestic environment. Here, I highlight 3 key areas that the Service needs to pay attention to.

Dealing with Complexity and Uncertainty

12 First, the Service needs to develop the capacity to deal with complexity and uncertainty. The government has traditionally operated in a structured environment, with clear rules and guidelines to inform the decision-making process. Going forward, this approach will not be enough. Many

emerging challenges and issues cannot be resolved by existing policies and rules.

13 Public officers must therefore have the capacity to learn and adapt constantly. I am glad to note that over the years, the Civil Service has made use of scenario planning, and more recently, has developed a risk assessment and horizon scanning system. These are helpful tools for us to better anticipate, at the strategic level, surprises and discontinuities that may be looming.

14 But being aware of alternative futures and alert to quick turn of events is not enough. We must be ready to take action. Indeed, increasingly there will be times when we may need to take action in the absence of complete information, or even before our existing policies become inadequate to deal with emerging problems. Such an approach requires more risk-taking, willingness to experiment and a tenacity of spirit which is not crippled by setbacks or failure but indeed strengthened by it.

15 Recruiting the best people gives us the right human capital to begin with. But the Service needs to test such officers by giving them opportunities to bring out the leader in them. Such exposure will strengthen their character and competency in adversity.

16 In navigating the unpredictable and the unknown, we need to have mastery over the basics. When there is no map to rely on to show the way, we need to be able to read the stars and have an intuitive feel for the direction we want to head for. To guide us along the way, we need to go back to basics and first principles. How do we prepare and develop our best officers to navigate in such a manner is the challenge that the Public Service must address, if it is to be as successful in the future, as it has been in the past.

Whole-of-Government: Networked government

17 The second point that I wish to raise starts with the recognition that challenges today do not respect agency

boundaries. Many emerging problems and issues do not fall neatly under the purview of any one agency. Problems and issues have to be tackled by different agencies working in concert if we are to arrive at an optimal outcome for Singapore. A whole-of-government orientation and approach is obviously needed.

18 Singapore's bid for the Youth Olympic Games is an example of how public agencies came together within a short period of time to seize an opportunity, an opportunity with no guarantee of success, I might add. Singapore's bid was a collective effort across many agencies as we had to address 15 thematic areas, including sporting venues, accommodation, transport, marketing, security, medical services, media operations and technology. There was also a need to engage the public and private sector as stakeholders. I will elaborate on this later.

19 The IOC's greatest concern was whether the new NUS University Town would be completed in time, by 2010, to be

the Youth Olympic Village. Many agencies – including MOE, MCYS, MOM, MND and BCA – worked closely together to place the building of the University Town under a Green Lane framework so that the approval process for construction could be shortened considerably. This assured the IOC that our Government worked as a single entity. I am told that the close cooperation among all the public agencies impressed the IOC technical expert who visited Singapore.

20 A whole-of-government approach however is not without inherent tensions. On the one hand, we need the specialisations and competencies of each agency and ministry in Government in order to deal with complex problems in depth. On the other hand, we need the capacity to be able see and act in a coordinated manner beyond our areas of responsibilities. We need to have a holistic understanding of the larger and fuller picture across the whole of Government which the broad inter-connectivity of issues today invariably require.

21 A whole-of-government approach is not aimed at homogenising the diversity of agencies that make up Government today. It is about harnessing this diversity as a source of strength, which otherwise can threaten to compartmentalise Government into deep and narrow silos.

22 The ability of the Public Service to work as one is an outcome of deliberate design and determination. The formation of cross-agency project teams to deal with inter-agency issues is becoming more common; officers from various agencies and backgrounds are brought together in training programmes and seminars so that their collective experience can be shared. These efforts help ensure that every public officer understands and internalises the need for the government to work as one, even as they continue to develop their domain expertise in depth.

Engaging Citizens & Stakeholders

23 The third point I wish to make is that the Public Service must stay in tune with and engage the society it serves. Public

officers must be able to empathise with the ‘man-on-the-street’ and take a more citizen-centric view in policy development and service delivery. This does not mean that we pander to the whims and fancies of every individual but rather that we ensure that what we do ultimately serves the collective well-being and prosperity of our people. Policies cannot be made with the exception as the norm. But good policy-making and implementation allows the public officer to recognize and be responsive to justifiable exceptions that deserve a second look and re-consideration.

24 Public officers need to feel the pulse of society and understand at the same time, the fundamentals of governance which underpin our safe and peaceful multi-ethnic society. Policies and laws are always made and implemented within a specific social, political and cultural context. As our society develops and becomes more complex, we will face more competing imperatives and interests. Public officers must be sensitive to and clear in understanding and articulating these trade-offs, so that we can make a better informed and

principled judgement over them. This has to be a standard that public officers require of themselves in all policy and implementation.

25 For instance, as a multi-ethnic society, we want to give maximal space to our communities to live freely and in peace. But that can only occur if there is social cohesion founded on a shared commitment to ethnic and racial harmony and a respect for the common secular space. As a modern society, we want to give individuals and groups greater autonomy and empowerment but that can only occur if in turn, there is greater personal accountability and responsibility, and respect for the common rules of engagement.

26 I am glad to see that the Service has, over the years, put in place many channels to engage citizens and stakeholders. We have been leveraging on IT and online channels to foster greater bonding within different communities, for example through the Youth Portal and Overseas Singaporean Portal. Within the Home Team, promising officers are identified early

in their careers for two-year attachments to grassroots organizations to get an understanding of the public they serve. LTA recently set up a new “Land Transport Community Partnership Division” for greater community involvement in land transport issues. The Administrative Service too, has a community involvement programme. These are important programmes which can help engender a more intuitive understanding of the needs and concerns of our society.

LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES

Developing Leadership Capacity

27 It is an exciting time to be part of the Singapore Public Service. We are embarking on new opportunities – integrated resorts, Formula One, eco-city project in Tianjin, exporting of our public sector expertise, and the hosting of the inaugural Youth Olympics. There are also many domestic challenges for which we need creative and out-of-the-box solutions – ageing population, foreign talent, low income, population issues, just to name a few.

28 It is even more challenging for the Administrative Service as the Service is expected to provide the leadership for the public sector. Administrative Officers cannot function effectively by working at things themselves, however brilliant they are or however hard they work. They need to work effectively with and through others. They must have the 'softer' skills to relate to people, to draw out the best in them and to inspire them to follow and work together. The defining quality for the Administrative Officer must be effective leadership.

29 The Public Service Division and the Civil Service College have made some headway in this through the leadership training of Administrative Officers. There is now greater focus on leadership development in the milestone programmes for Administrative Officers. I understand that, starting from this year, the College will introduce a new programme for newly appointed Administrative Officers to better prepare them for managerial positions.

30 In addition, to help Administrative Officers gain experience in working and leading in different contexts, the Public Service Division is deploying more Administrative Officers to postings outside the Ministries – to operational, private sector, and overseas postings. Administrative Officers and Management Associates also take part in 360-feedback exercises regularly to get feedback from their peers and staff reporting to them. This will help them hone their managerial and leadership skills.

Living the Public Service Values

31 Now, let me speak a little about the values that undergird this august institution called the Public Service. You as Administrative Officers are the very embodiment of the core values of the Public Service as summarised in the three words – “Integrity, Service and Excellence”. We must never forget the fundamentals that underpin the core of the Public Service.

32 “Integrity, Service, Excellence” - these values define what it means to be part of the Public Service. They guide the

actions and decisions of all our public officers, whether they are writing policy papers, serving a customer at the frontlines, inspecting vehicles at the checkpoints, or even pruning trees in the gardens.

33 But as role models in the Service, you as Administrative Officers are expected to lead by example, live out these values daily, with an unwavering commitment to serve Singapore and Singaporeans.

PS Appointment Ceremony

34 The most senior civil servant leader at every ministry is the Permanent Secretary. He is the CEO. On his shoulders lie the duty to, not just lead and motivate his people to conceive good and sound policies, but also to get them well implemented.

35 I am happy to learn that Public Service Division has instituted a formal appointment ceremony for newly appointed Permanent Secretaries. The ceremony will be officiated by

the President. The first one will take place at the end of this month. Such a ceremony underscores the value and importance we attach to leadership in Government, and serves as a reminder to all civil servants of the responsibility that they have as civil servants to serve Singapore and Singaporeans.

CONCLUSION

36 We have an outstanding Public Service - one that is well regarded internationally and one that is trusted by Singaporeans to be efficient, effective and incorruptible. How to stay “outstanding” is the challenge that the leadership in the Public Service will have to address even as it grapples with the future. Officers of the Administrative Service play a critical role in the leadership of the Public Service. All of you are therefore uniquely placed to help address this challenge and in the process, make a real difference to the quality of governance in Singapore and the lives of all who call Singapore “home”.

Thank you.

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