

We set you thinking

TODAY

MONDAY 21 MAY 2018

We set you thinking
Singapore World Big Read Opinion Visuals Brand Spotlight



Success of new national conversation depends on participation of 'naysayers' and the less privileged

By KWAN JIN YAO



Koh Mui Fong/TODAY

Published 21 MAY, 2018

UPDATED 21 MAY, 2018



On the same day that Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat announced that fourth-



RECOMMENDED FOR YOU

Sleepy driver who killed pedestrian jailed 3 months,...

CURRENTLY READING

Success of new national conversation depends on...

...to seek out more non-establishment types to participate in national-level focus groups, committees, boards, ministries, and Parliament" ("**Open up to dissenting voices to build a more resilient Singapore: NMP**"; May 17).

I also agree with Ms Kuik that "there are more people who have dissenting views about what's going on in our country than government-commissioned opinion polls reveal" (which, at its core, is related to sampling issues).

In this vein, the success of the upcoming national conversations could depend on whether "naysayers" and less-privileged Singaporeans take part in these discussions, as well as the extent to which they can set the agenda and to extend their participation beyond these one-off endeavours.

Those who have taken part in the Our Singapore Conversation series in 2012 and 2013 and subsequent sessions by the education and defence ministries, and who have benefited from the interactions with different Singaporeans, run the risks of running over the same old ground and of selective engagement.

A quick scan of the 48-page Our Singapore Conversation summary report — Mr Heng was in charge then — reveals observations which speak of these risks.

The word "sceptic" appears 15 times throughout the report and, in particular, Professor Kenneth Paul Tan, a committee member of Our Singapore Conversation, wrote about the importance of inclusiveness in public deliberation.

He first observed "the unmistakable exclusion (from the committee) of opposition politicians, prominent activists, and public intellectuals known for their more controversial views" and warned against the exclusion of "the so-called vocal minority", but noted that the conversations were a start to build discursive spaces for diverse groups of Singaporeans.

Whether Our Singapore Conversation was successful in engaging those with opposing views, however, is less clear.

Many of the themes and headlines presented in 2013 remain contested or unresolved to date, and while they may point to a lack of progress, they also hint either at repetitive agendas or broader problems related to how the discussions



RECOMMENDED FOR YOU
**Sleepy driver who killed
 pedestrian jailed 3 months,...**

CURRENTLY READING
**Success of new national
 conversation depends on...**

subsequent initiatives such as SGfuture and the Youth Conversations.

More precisely, many of the headlines in the five-year-old report were just talked about in the past week in Parliament: "Singapore can do better in education and meritocracy" and "Let's broaden how success is defined" (by Education Minister Ong Ye Kung), "What makes a Singaporean" (by Ms Indranee Rajah, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office), and "A home or an asset?" (by National Development Minister Lawrence Wong).

In other words, how are the upcoming discussions announced by Mr Heng substantively different from those in the past? And how will those with "dissenting views", even if they are virulently anti-government, be invited and engaged?

Bear in mind, too, the less-privileged Singaporeans who may be struggling to make ends meet, who are therefore less likely to have their perspectives represented. Or an over-reliance on Singaporeans already familiar to the Government.

Mr Heng mentioned "different" four times in a single sentence, when explaining the planned outreach "to different segments of society... people in different occupations, who have different interests and passions, and who are contributing back to society in different ways", yet the difference has to be more precisely quantified.

And finally, how the agenda of the conversation or discussion is set matters. A limitation of the Committee to Strengthen National Service, for instance, was the presumption that conscription is necessary in the first place, which as a consequence precluded individuals who may wish to pose more fundamental questions.

Mr Heng said that the government will consolidate views shared in the House "before providing further details on the discussion series", though perhaps more fundamentally a participant-driven discursive agenda could be beneficial. If it is the case that government does not always know best, empowering citizens to take a lead would be a useful start.

Related Stories