

Singapore's Four Principles Of Governance

By Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong spoke at the opening of the Commonwealth Association of Public Administration and Management (CAPAM) Biennial Conference held in Singapore in October. In his speech he discussed Singapore's four broad principles of governance and noted that while some principles were universal, others were unique and pertained only to Singapore. *Ethos* is pleased to present the main text of his speech.

Introduction

Back in 1971 more than 30 years ago, the Commonwealth Heads of Government met in Singapore. At that time, it was called the Commonwealth PM's Conference. They declared their commitment to a common set of principles of good governance. These principles included upholding individual rights, opposing racial discrimination, reinforcing the rule of law, and implementing sound economic management.

Globalisation and Its Impact on Governance

The circumstances which governments face have changed dramatically over these 30 years. Globalisation—the powerful force now sweeping the world—was not a preoccupation back in 1971. Today, goods and services, people and capital, fashions and fads, flow freely and rapidly between countries and across continents. It is a profound global reality that countries can no longer be isolated, one from another. No country, big or small, advanced or developing, is exempt from the effects of globalisation.

One of the major effects of globalisation is how it shapes the way governments operate. First, it

makes the job much more complex. Because the world is so much more closely inter-related, many more variables can affect a policy, and have to be taken into account where demands on the Public Service are much greater.

Secondly, globalisation makes good governance a shared concern. Whether it is financial crises, terrorism, or viruses, a crisis mishandled in one country can become a serious problem for many other countries. The contagion can spread through television, the internet, or on jet planes. We all have a vested interest in good governance in one another's countries.

Third, globalisation restricts our degrees of freedom. Capital is mobile, seeking the best returns worldwide. Talent is also mobile, looking for opportunities globally and welcome in many countries. If a government sets policies that don't work or that disregard the concerns of its constituents, the country will quickly pay a heavy price.

How can those of us responsible for the governance of our countries navigate successfully in such a demanding environment? There is no answer to these questions but let me offer some thoughts.

Successful Governance is Founded on Principles

I believe successful governance must have at its core a set of principles and values that are enduring and relevant to the people living in that society. Strategies and tactics may change, but principles are anchors that give governments a firm footing even in uncertain or turbulent times.

The trouble is, how do we decide what principles to adopt? On the one hand, some universal considerations are relevant to nearly all countries.

One example is maintaining the integrity of the public service, and avoiding waste and excesses. Another is ensuring the financial soundness of the systems being managed, whether it is pensions, health care, banking or even CAPAM itself. Either a system is financially sound or it is not. Many Asian countries learnt this the hard way during the Asian Financial Crisis, when they discovered that there was no such thing as an Asian approach to supervising a banking system. So, international organisations like the IMF are strong advocates of governance reforms, and tie their aid programmes to the requirements of good governance. These are usually the universally accepted good practices.

But meeting benchmarks and following best practices does not automatically lead to good governance, nor does it guarantee a bright future for the country. Ultimately, every government must also consider the unique circumstances of its country, the nature of its society, the expectations of its people, and decide on the path they want to take. So successful governance has to be a combination of universal principles as well as policies that are tailored to each country's unique circumstances.

Singapore's Principles of Governance

In Singapore's case, we have over time evolved our own principles of governance, which include both universal and unique elements. One way they can be expressed and distilled down is into four principles, which summarise our experience and values.

First, we believe that "Leadership is Key". We are a small country. If other countries are like big oil tankers, Singapore is just a speed boat. We are more vulnerable at sea, and so we have to be more agile and better able to avoid hazards. So we must have able leaders to steer our speed boat.

Whether it's in the political arena or in public administration, at all levels we need leaders who can articulate a compelling vision that will inspire Singaporeans and mobilise them to achieve their best for the country. We need leaders who will do what is right, and not necessarily what is popular.

We need people with moral courage and integrity to acknowledge and correct past mistakes, and recognise when an existing policy has outlived its usefulness and has to be discarded or changed.

This is why we have done our utmost to ensure that our public sector continues to attract its fair share of the nation's talent. This requirement that we have good leaders, able people in the public sector, drives our systems of recruitment, career development, and remuneration.

A second broad principle is to "Anticipate Change and Stay Relevant". Given the pace and scale of change facing all countries, no public service can afford to be passive or reactive, following established rules and administering existing systems, as we used to say—"time-tested practices". We need to be open to new ideas, and to keep questioning old assumptions, and never be trapped in the past.

This is easier said than done. In Singapore, we recently carried out an exercise to rethink the role of our civil service and we reached a few conclusions. We concluded our civil service needed to take more risks, instead of always sticking to the tried-and-tested. It needs to be more familiar with businesses and markets and economics, and be a facilitator and promoter, instead of just a regulator of business. We needed to function in a more networked fashion, to cope with new issues that are complex and multifaceted.

The third principle is "Reward for Work, and Work for Reward". This principle reflects Singapore's political values. It has evolved over time and has become a basic part of the outlook of our people. Singaporeans understand that no one owes us a living, and given our set of circumstances — small, without natural resources, and highly dependent on the outside world — we can only earn a living and safeguard our future through our efforts and wits.

While self-reliance is a fundamental and unchanging spirit among our people, its actual implementation needs to be continually calibrated and fine-tuned. If we depend entirely on individual responsibility and leave the weaker members of our society to fend for themselves, we undermine the bonds which hold our society together. But if we provide too generous a safety net, then it will eventually sap the self-motivation of the population, and the country will stagnate.

Every government has to strike this balance, and that will vary from country to country. But in Singapore, the concept of working for reward, and rewarding those who work is deeply ingrained among our workers and employers, and in the civil service too.

Our fourth principle is to create “A Stake for Everyone, and Opportunities for All”. The end goal of any governance system is not institutional strength, or even economic well-being, but nation-building. It is about creating an inclusive society where citizens not merely enjoy economic wealth, but feel a sense of ownership and belonging.

Our goal is to make Singapore a land of opportunity, a home we love, a community we belong to, and a country which we are proud to call our own. This requires careful balancing among competing forces. We need to promote a sense of collective responsibility in an age of individual empowerment. We need to build emotional stakes in our society even as globetrotting is an everyday occurrence. And we need to preserve our core values as a nation amid a sea of competing ideas and influences.

Conclusion

These are four principles but principles are empty words unless public officers believe in them, share them across agencies, and translate them into policies and practices. It is less important that public officers are able to recite the principles forwards and backwards, than that they intuitively understand what these principles mean, why they are important and apply them in the course of their daily work.

Principles are also not panacea for issues of governance. You have principles but you still need to analyse problems, understand them and figure out in each case, what is the right thing to do. Our principles reflect Singapore’s unique history and circumstances. They have served us well but we also have had our share of mistakes and misses. We have to continue to seek answers to difficult issues, like all other countries. But these principles have helped by creating a common basis from which we can tackle and solve the many complex problems which arise in governing a country. ■