

# Reflections on Thirty-Five Years of Public Service: From Espionage to Babies

*By Eddie Teo*

On 30 November 2005, Mr Eddie Teo retired as Permanent Secretary (Prime Minister's Office) as part of the scheme to renew public sector leadership. Mr Teo spent most of his 35 years in the public sector in the Security and Intelligence Division and for several years he also ran the Internal Security Department. He was Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Defence from 1994 to 2000. He then became Permanent Secretary at the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). At PMO he tackled a diverse slate of national issues ranging from encouraging Singaporeans to have more children to National Education. What follows is an edited version of Mr Teo's farewell address to the Public Service Division and the Civil Service College in November 2005. In February 2006, he will become Singapore's High Commissioner to Australia.

## Introduction

**Y**ou may not believe me, but 35 years go by like the blink of an eye. It seems like only yesterday when I appeared before the Public Service Commission (PSC) and told them I would like to join the Intelligence Service. I must have been the first returning scholar to make such a request, for the panel was taken aback, and asked me how I knew that there was such an organisation in Singapore. I did not say that I had been approached to join the Security and Intelligence Division (SID) by an SID officer at a party; I told the PSC that my guess was that every country had an intelligence service and Singapore could not possibly be an exception.

Within a week, I was posted to SID, where I stayed for 24 years. I was concurrently Director of the Internal Security Department for four years during that period. In 1994, I moved to the Ministry of Defence (Mindef), and in 1998, I

moved to the Prime Minister's Office. Hence, more than two thirds of my career was in the Intelligence Service and only one third in the Administrative Service.

With less than a month to go before my retirement, let me share with you a few parting thoughts about my public service career. Someone urged me to impart some wisdom. I do not know whether what I say will be wise, but I hope it will be useful.

First of all, I count myself very lucky to be born and living in Singapore. Here, if you study hard and do well in school, the government gives you a scholarship. Without a scholarship, I could not have gone to the UK to study. My wife, who was born in Kuching, was one of the better students in her school, but she never got a scholarship, simply because she was Chinese.

I also count myself fortunate that I work in the Singapore Public Service and not in some other public service. Over my 35 years of public service, I have met many foreign public servants. Some were happy, but for the wrong reasons. One proudly showed me a diamond-studded belt buckle that a businessman had given him; he said he saw no reason not to take it, as he was not going to do any favour for his generous friend. Another told me he made extra money by being involved in the arms trade, which was allowed so long as he did not make too much money. I did not think it polite to ask him how much was too much. Other public servants I met were disillusioned and unhappy about the state of affairs in their country, but knew that there was little they could do about it. They became frustrated and bitter, and eventually left.

I stayed in the public service for three reasons. First, I enjoyed the work. I felt I was doing something important and something worthwhile for Singapore. Second, the system was fair and

the people honest. Third, I was never attracted to the private sector.

### Security & Intelligence Division

Those of you who are familiar with a talk I gave to SID a few years ago will realise how much I loved the 24 years I spent in SID. Where else are you privy to the most sensitive secrets held by government and to the deepest thoughts of our political leaders? In what other job can you expect Mr. Lee Kuan Yew to so frequently turn to you for advice and information before he decides on national policy?

Intelligence work is never boring and always exciting because you deal with real life and real people, and you are expected to know the capability, judge the character and assess the intentions of Singapore's adversaries. There is nothing like a difficult, seemingly impossible, assignment to inject excitement into a job.

I felt privileged working in intelligence, but I also felt humbled every time SID got things wrong. After one particularly bad mistake, I accepted responsibility and offered to resign. But my letter was ignored. I guess they thought it was an honest mistake.

Working in SID taught me many things. First, that people are not always what they seem to be. At cocktail parties and during negotiations, people sometimes lie, tell half-truths, float trial balloons and pass a line.

Second, that personal friendships with foreign officials are useful to smoothen interactions but national interests always transcend sentiments, goodwill and friendship. By all means play golf, socialise and build ties with foreign officials, but never forget that the purpose for you (as well as for them) is to further the national interest. If the political winds change, personal friendship will mean nothing.

Third, that every intelligence operation involves risk-taking. You have to ask if the intelligence requirement is of strategic importance to Singapore before you push an agent or an officer to take that extra risk.

Finally, intelligence requires integrity. You have to tell your political masters the truth, no matter how unpleasant and unacceptable they may find it. You have to be fair to your agents and take care of them and their families if they are caught.

Otherwise, your agency's reputation will suffer and you will find that nobody will want to risk his life working for you again.

But there were some downsides working in SID. Because you see so much duplicity and skulduggery, you sometimes forget that there are also good people in this world—people who are decent, loyal, sincere, compassionate and generous. You can become over suspicious, even a little paranoid, and suspect everybody's motives, sometimes unfairly. You also learn to listen more than you speak, because you are trained to absorb as much intelligence as you can and to reveal as little as possible. So when I moved out of SID to Mindef and then PMO, I had to learn to communicate better so people would know what was required of them.

### The Ministry of Defence

What was it like working in Mindef? Mindef is a huge ministry, with many power centres and highly specialised experts. No permanent secretary can hope to know what is going on throughout the ministry. Nor can he be the only channel to the minister, as is quite possible in other smaller ministries. There will be many areas where he has little domain knowledge and others know much more than him. Unlike in SID, I never felt that I was totally in charge and fully responsible.

But the permanent secretary has a key role maintaining a proper balance among the different power groups—the military leaders, the scientists and technologists, the defence policy officers, and the finance and personnel people—to ensure that by the time the issues reach the minister, the options presented are the best possible for Mindef. His role is not to arrive at a consensus on every issue, so that only the lowest common denominator is arrived at. His role is to ensure that the dynamic tension that is always at play among the varying concerns—the Singapore Armed Forces' (SAF) operational needs, scientific and technological capabilities, defence policy considerations and financial and resource discipline—is clearly and honestly reflected and that rational decisions can be made in the country's overall best interest.

In military acquisitions, large sums of money are involved. Many countries decide on the purchase of military items on the basis of the amount of illegal commissions given by arms dealers to government officials. Here again, incorruptibility

is a vital advantage to Singapore because we can decide on weapons systems that best suit us professionally, rather than those which fetch the biggest bribe.

In Mindef, I had to adjust from analyzing and interpreting events to actually formulating and recommending policies. Defence diplomacy requires similar skill sets as intelligence liaison; only the characters are different. Instead of intelligence officers, I networked with military and defence officials. Instead of obtaining intelligence, my job was to obtain defence technology, military training areas and sophisticated weaponry for the SAF, at the best possible price.

Defence diplomacy is also an exercise to deter a potential predator from thinking of attacking Singapore. We achieve this by selectively showing how capable and powerful the SAF is. Not just in terms of the amount of firepower we have, but also in how efficiently we organize ourselves and how swiftly and systematically we move into operations—for instance, during non-military crises like the evacuation of Singaporeans from Cambodia a few years ago or more recently, when we supplied assistance to Aceh during the tsunami disaster.

### The Prime Minister's Office

**P**MO is quite different from Mindef. It is much smaller, and less focused. But there is one aspect of the work here that I find familiar—assessing people for posting and promotion. In SID, I spent all my time trying to read the character of political leaders and guess their next moves. In Mindef, half my time was spent ranking and rating SAF officers. In PSD, my key responsibility is to ensure that we put the right people in the right jobs and develop the best officers for future leadership. All these jobs require the ability to judge people accurately.

I enjoy finding out from our younger officers what their aspirations for the future are—what kind of public service they would like to have, and what kind of government and country they want. We must continue to allow and encourage our younger people to speak up so that they will stay engaged and have hope for the future and confidence in Singapore. They should have the same kind of self-confidence that you find when you go to China. The youth in China believe in

China and know that China is becoming a great world power. Our youth must also believe in Singapore and our ability to overcome problems. Singapore cannot survive and prosper if our young people lose hope and have no confidence.

As public servants, our job is to help the government ensure that our future citizens remain committed to, engaged in and confident about, Singapore. This is one reason we are conducting a review of the National Education messages—to balance awareness of our vulnerability with a new message of hope, for there is much that Singaporeans should be hopeful about.

### Population Issues

**I**n PMO, I have also been given jobs that my previous jobs did not prepare me for. For instance, trying to persuade Singaporeans to marry and produce babies. When this was first announced, a journalist friend, who is single, e-mailed me to wish me luck. She said that I would find it more difficult to raise the total fertility rate (TFR) than to go to war. She was right. After all the goodies we gave out in the last five years, the TFR dropped last year and this year it is likely to rise only a little from 1.24, well short of the replacement rate of 2.1. I guess one could argue that if we had done nothing, the TFR could have dropped even lower, below 1.24.

Experience elsewhere seems to suggest that we should temper our expectations. A comprehensive RAND study on the population problems of European Union countries concludes that government policy is likely to slow down the fall in fertility rates, as opposed to halting the fall or bringing them back to replacement level.<sup>1</sup>

The saving grace for Singapore is that unlike countries like Japan, we can fall back on immigration as a solution. If Singaporeans still do not produce the babies we need, we will have to rely more on foreigners and new citizens to top up our population. Increasing our population through immigration is a delicate exercise that requires deft political handling and public servants must be aware of the social and political issues that have to be addressed. But we may have no other choice as our population continues to shrink and age.

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Grant et al, "Low Fertility and Population Ageing: Causes, Consequences and Policy Options," (RAND Corporation for the European Commission, 2004).

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If we succeed in attracting more foreigners to become citizens, we have to ensure that they are properly integrated and share Singapore's core values. Otherwise, we may end up with all sorts of political, social and economic problems which could tear our nation apart. However, if the change is well-managed, we must also be prepared to accept a Singapore which is very different—a more diverse, vibrant and cosmopolitan Singapore, enhanced in its creativity by the richness and depth of a variety of cultures and individuals.

Israel is one rare example of a society that recently struggled with absorbing Russian and Ethiopian immigrants but has survived the traumas to emerge richer for the experience. Many European countries have not done so well and are only now waking up to the need to better integrate their immigrants.

Another task I have had is to establish a sustainable structure to get many government agencies to work together in engaging overseas Singaporeans—students, businessmen, professionals—so that the Singapore diaspora can continue to contribute to Singapore and some will eventually return. We must stay in touch with them and show them we care if we do not want to lose them for good to other countries. We must put in at least as much effort and resources to engage Singaporeans abroad as we are in reaching out to foreigners. I am happy that agencies have moved from a position of benign neglect to one of keen interest in this subject.

### The Reputation of the Public Service

When I joined the Public Service 35 years ago, I knew that I was joining a highly respected and well regarded profession. It is important that the Public Service continues to have the respect and trust of the people of Singapore, as well as the confidence of

its political masters. If its reputation is tarnished as a result of the constant bashing of public servants whenever things go awry, no self-respecting, bright Singaporean will want to join the public service, no matter how attractive the pay.

By convention, public servants do not defend themselves when they are criticized and vilified. If the complaints against them are fair, they should own up, apologise, endeavour to do better, and move on, or move out if the mistake is very serious. But if they are attacked unfairly, public servants depend on the politicians to defend them and speak up for them. Some younger public servants have pointed out that this is happening less frequently nowadays than in the past. Given a more demanding and vocal public, public servants ought to expect more complaints than before, and we will have to establish a new balance which acknowledges the quality of our public service while recognising its shortcomings and the need to constantly improve.

Foreigners and new citizens appreciate that we have a first-class Public Service, one of the best in the world. It is only Singaporeans who seem to doubt it. One of the challenges ahead is to realign perceptions so that our Public Service is regarded by all—Singaporeans as well as non-Singaporeans—as first-class. ■

## Interview

*In an interview with Ethos, Mr Teo commented on the relationship between public service and political leaders. He also reflected on three of the biggest challenges for the Public Service.*

### **What, in your view, would be the ideal relationship between the political and civil service leadership?**

I don't believe in ideal relationships. But the relationship between the public service leaders and political leaders can be very good if they understand and accept each other's role.

The civil servant must always be satisfied that if he has done a good job, he will get quiet praise and not receive public acclamation. The civil servant does not need publicity because unlike the politician, he does not have to go to the polls every four years to get elected. If he appears in public, it is to support the politician in explaining public policy, not to present different views or take public credit. If his views are valued by the politicians, there is no need for him to go public. If they are not valued, he should resign rather than go public.

That is my understanding of the civil servant's role. He must retain the trust and confidence of the government he serves. This may sound old-fashioned to some younger civil servants, but I do not believe in public whistle-blowing by civil servants. Those politicians who share this understanding of the civil servant's role will be able to make best use of the civil servants who support them. They will know that the civil servant is there to do his bidding and to offer quiet advice. The politician has the prerogative to listen to such advice or reject it. In the Singapore context, the civil servant will not go public or leak documents to show proof that he was right and the politician was wrong. At least, not in my generation.

Elsewhere, the tradition of the loyal and discreet civil servant seems to have broken down. Even in the UK, we now have a former British Ambassador to the US publishing a book critical of British foreign policy and his Prime Minister, just two years after his retirement.

In Singapore, what public service leaders should

look for in their relationship with the political leaders are clear instructions and room to give considered advice. They should not expect their views to prevail all the time but they should be given a fair hearing.

### **What are the three top challenges ahead for the Public Service?**

The first challenge is recruiting and retaining good people. We need to continue to recruit a fair share of the best and the brightest Singaporeans into our Public Service so that we can continue to develop a continuous stream of high quality public sector leaders.

The Public Service has improved in quality over the years, in line with the general population. It is now more professional, better trained and more stable than it was when I first joined in 1970. There was a period in the 1980s and early 1990s when the attrition rate was quite high and many mid-level officers left for the private sector. The pay relative to the private sector was then very poor and promotion was slow.

In the mid-1990s, Lim Siong Guan, then Permanent Secretary at the Prime Minister's Office, put in place many significant structural reforms to ensure that very promising officers were spotted early, tested quickly and given faster promotions. The government also increased public service salaries. This helped stabilise the situation and we now have a bigger pool of excellent, younger officers who have the potential to succeed to the senior public service positions.

In the old Public Service, people who joined had an "iron rice bowl" mentality. They thought they would stay their whole career in a safe, if not very lucrative, environment. Today, not all our young officers expect to stay their whole working life in the public service. The better officers are anxious to know early if they can rise to the top. Our challenge is to ensure that those we identify as having the potential to rise to the top, will stay. To ensure that younger officers do not have to wait too long to reach the top, we introduced term appointments for public service leaders. In the steady state, two to three permanent secretaries will step down every year in their mid-fifties—before their retirement age—and younger officers will succeed them.

The second challenge is operating as whole government. As most of our policy issues and problems become increasingly complex, they can no longer be solved by single agencies and ministries. We have to develop a way to get ministries to instinctively work closely with each other and structures and processes that can sustain such inter-ministerial projects.

In my experience with inter-ministry issues, I have learnt several lessons. When dealing with complex issues, assigning clear responsibilities is important. Because implementation is vital in policy work, public servants must have a clear demarcation of their mandates. If everyone is responsible for an issue, then no one will be responsible and the work will not get done. So, while it is good to have a free-for-all at the beginning to garner new ideas, a sustained solution requires specific responsibilities. And this must be followed up by regular monitoring and reporting on progress. Politicians can outline their vision and broad goals, but public servants must set up the structure and establish the process to achieve the vision.

A process is necessary for effective implementation, but public servants should not

let the process take over and become more important than the goals. Just as ineffective implementation causes ideas to fail, ideas can also fail when public servants implement them mindlessly.

Delineation of responsibilities should not fossilize the agencies into narrow interpretations of what they are supposed to do or not do. Being responsible for something does not preclude you from cooperating with another agency for the good of Singapore.

The third challenge is to retain the trust and confidence of Singaporeans. As our people become more demanding, their expectations of quality public service delivery and a bigger role in public policy formulation will mean that public servants must inform more openly, explain more clearly and consult more frequently.

The Public Service, as well as the rest of Singapore, has to become more innovative and market-savvy and less bureaucratic and more consultative. ■