
ETHOSPEECHES

IN TIME FOR THE FUTURE:

Singapore's Heads of Civil Service on Change,
Complexity and Networked Government

Speeches by LIM Siong Guan and Peter HO



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Introduction

This volume collects key speeches by the current and previous Heads of Civil Service (HCS) over a period of seven years (2002 to 2008). It is part of an ongoing effort by the Civil Service College to document the evolution in thinking and philosophy behind many important public sector initiatives over the past decade. We hope that even readers who have read or heard these speeches before will uncover fresh insights when re-reading them in the context of an entire collection. It is also our hope that this collection will elicit deeper reflection among public officers about the core values and principles that underpin our mission; the challenges and demands facing the Public Service in the 21st century; and what we need to do to be in time for the future.

Throughout the collection, the reader will notice an overriding emphasis on building a Public Service that keeps pace with a fast-changing external environment and with increasing customer and citizen expectations. This emphasis is not unique to Singapore. The 1990s witnessed a proliferation of public sector reform efforts worldwide, particularly in developed nations. Following the wave of privatisation and deregulation in the 1980s, many governments realised that beyond shrinking the size of government, they also had to bring about a more effective and efficient public sector. “Reinventing government” became the new mantra as public sectors around the world sought to enhance their performance, improve service delivery, ensure better policy implementation and harness the creativity and innovation of the private sector through new

partnership arrangements. Technology played a significant role: the revolution in information technologies provided governments with a huge opportunity not just to integrate services across departmental boundaries, but also to engage and connect with citizens in ways not possible before.

CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE

The Singapore Public Service was very much alive to these changes and the opportunities they presented. The Public Service for the 21st century (PS21) movement, initiated in 1995 by then Head of Civil Service, **Mr Lim Siong Guan**, was founded on the idea that Singapore's continued success depended on a Public Service that *welcomes, anticipates and executes change*. The goal of PS21, Mr Lim explained, "is a transformation of the Singapore Public Service, from reactivity to proactivity, from a satisfaction with the present to a questioning of the future."

Singapore's innate vulnerabilities—size, geography and history—magnify the importance of such a mental orientation. In the speech "PS21—The Strategic Imperative", Mr Lim reminds the reader that "a small country like Singapore can little influence, much less decide what happens in the world and the region." He adds: "We must learn to anticipate demands, influence developments, and meet needs in ways that are innovative and provide Singapore the competitive edge over other nations. The capacity to create conditions for Singapore to stay ahead of the competition of tomorrow must expand if we are to make it to the next century."

Another aspect of effective governance that Mr Lim emphasised was *forging a networked government*. Again, Singapore was not alone in seeking to integrate the different parts of government to deliver better service. Britain in the late 1990s also sought to cultivate a "joined up government". As government operations increase in density, complexity and sophistication, a common response has been to establish ever more specialised agencies to cater to new and specific needs. This poses at least two challenges. First,