

**LECTURE BY
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**AT THE
CSC NEW INSIGHTS LECTURE**

**“GETTING TO THE BARE NECESSITIES, THE
SIMPLE BARE NECESSITIES - CONVERSING THE
GLOBAL PUBLIC SERVICE LINGO”**

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Bismillahir rahmanir rahim

Assalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh

Mr Peter Ho, Head of Civil Service Singapore

My colleagues from the Public Service of Singapore

A very good morning.

There is a Greek proverb which reads – “A society grows old when old men plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in”. We cannot leave change only to the seniors, but that it should be a cause for all especially our young. Why? Because this world is not inherited from our ancestors but we borrow from our children. Thus what we leave behind for them, will define how the stories of the two generations will be told.

2. On that note, thank you to Civil Service College of Singapore for this immense and immeasurable opportunity. I stand before you greatly humbled and with great pleasure. Humbled because I am aware that true wisdom lies in knowing we know very little and I have a lot more to learn, more so from you all. Pleasure – because I am amongst friends who share the same dreams and vision in public service. Thank you Peter for inviting me back to Singapore, and in this instance to share some thoughts on Malaysia’s own public sector, and its journey.

3. With your permission, please allow me to take a non-mandarin approach aka non-civil service slant, if you like, in sharing these thoughts with you this morning. Thank you

I. SO IT'S THE PUBLIC SERVICE

4. I began with the Public Service of Malaysia on the 15th of April 1974 and stayed with MITI for over 28 years that followed, except for 4 years with the Implementation Coordination Unit at the Prime Minister's Department and to do an MBA. The years in MITI taught me that a “global eye is only useful when we understand the importance of local touch”.

5. Having come from a modest background, my upbringing imbued the importance of relevance in our actions. Over the years, I have seen how my own improbable life have fitted into the bigger picture of my country, and what one can do in making changes. I am often reminded that – it is not what you do that will be remembered, but what you leave behind. Also, if you want to institute change, you must do it yourself first.

6. The quest for simplicity struck a chord with me. I am often persuaded that even the most obscure can be made natural, the staunchest nemesis can be made a friend, simplicity leads to pragmatic results, good character ensures sound outcome. One must explain actions, to help understanding and eradicate ambiguity.

7. Over the years in MITI, and since 3 September 2006 as the Chief Secretary to the Government, the one thing that often baffles me is that how common sense is often times conspicuously absent in delivery of service. This is not an exclusive affliction of the public sector the world over, I might add, but of the private sector as well. We have often taken a pie in the sky approach to servicing and service. This has added to the increased isolation of service providers and customers.

8. The core to MITI's business is anchored on engaging all stakeholders. There can be no investment, if we couldn't distinctly decipher quality investments. There would be no growth to our economy if we were not able to unravel where the growth prospects are with our market constituents. This may sound simple. But often it is grossly missed in the conviction that to solve the complex issues of the world, we need corresponding complexity in our solutions.

Ladies and gentlemen,

II. IVORY TOWER SYNDROME

9. The Public Service the world over, has often been branded an engine that frustrates and one that is marooned in its ivory towers of seclusion. While this may be an accurate assessment of pockets of the Service for a time, today we simply cannot afford this. Members of the private sector have often debated with us that the public service can afford to be lackadaisical, to put it mildly, simply because it has no bottom line to meet, no competition to wade, no going concerns to lose sleep over. But I would argue that if a nation is to enhance its comparative advantage and long-term competitiveness in the global markets, the public sector must be in FORM – a government that cost less and does more.

III. MALAYSIA BEYOND TODAY

10. As the twenty-first century unfolds, we are called on to brave new challenges. From waning economic fundamentals which once stood on the pedestal of glory to growing complexities of public health and education, the essentials which endured the tests of time are being

challenged, and needing redefinition urgently. To support these times, what is most urgent is a public service that is able to continually redefine itself. This need cannot be over emphasised and underestimated.

11. In the words of our Honourable Prime Minister, Dato' Sri Najib Tun Razak recently and I quote "Innovation does not belong to any particular individual or country or race because it can belong to everyone and if it is made into a culture or practice, it can empower a country". He has urged Malaysia to make big and bold changes with speed, for incremental changes will no longer be of use to us as a country.

12. With the flatter and interconnected world, our own destinies are entwined. This follows the entropic example that the movement of a butterfly's wings in the Amazon could potentially change the entire weather system somewhere else. The essence to this analogy is that small events can have big consequences somewhere else.

13. Across the bed of Malaysia's own multi-racial, multi-ethnic and multi-religious demography, we have an increasingly vociferous society, and a growing middle class and youth. With the changing demography, expectations are correspondingly recalibrated. In every society there will be the humps, and the bumps. I belong to the school that views these conflicts as an opportunity for advancement and growth, not otherwise. Adversity draws out the full potentials in people and situations, which advantages circumstances may not necessarily do.

14. There are many areas that Malaysia needs to further improve – from our immigration to enforcement. But we have instituted many successes and the many firsts in some. Our auto gate system at the airport is the first, the two hour (and even 1 hour) passport approval system continues to attract compliments, online government transactions from tax to summons to assessment and land office payments can now be done from the comfort of one's bedroom. So Citibank is not the only one that

brings that to their customers' doorstep. We do too. Companies and individuals need to only quote their identification numbers when transacting with us today. The one stop centres in our local authorities has cut down approval process and time for development applications by half. But we have more to do, and must never stop the culture of improving.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

IV. A COUNTRY FOR ALL

15. But all changes must be owned by the nation and its people. It cannot be done in spite of them. The world has often measured greatness of nations through its economic and military might. But in the years to come, we could safely say that greatness of a society will be anchored on individuals, their mindsets and their actions. The might of nations will be driven by intellectual currency, and its human capital.

16. When we have shared believes and vision across the fabric of society, we do not have to wait for an earthquake or tsunami to understand poverty and destitution. We needn't wait for wars and disasters to appreciate the basic fundamentals to education, literacy and healthcare. We must not seek to wait for irresponsibility in market making to understand greed, accountability and responsibility.

17. It is with this in mind that our Honourable Prime Minister led our Government to the Vision of **1Malaysia, People First and Performance Now**. The fundamentals of 1Malaysia is anchored on we are all Malaysians – Malays, Chinese, Indians, Ibans, Sikhs, Kadazan, et al; or whether Muslims, Buddhist, Hindus, Christians – all but all make Malaysia and have responsibilities towards it. Within this context, we are acutely aware that no one nation or society can prosper if parts of it live in destitution and desolation. Malaysia has been quite aggressive in

eradicating its urban and rural poverty levels. The target of the 9th Malaysia Plan (2006-2010) is to reduce the incidence of poverty to 2.8% by 2010 and totally eradicate hardcore poverty.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

V. THE GLOBAL LINGO, TODAY

18. We stand at a juncture of great change, struggle and dilemma as humanity, divided only by borders and sovereignty. Society demands for greater transparency, freedom and accountability, yet paradoxically emphasises on privacy and protectionism. The growing generations X and Y are far ahead of baby boomers on use of information. The converging borderless world of trade and talent, also struggles with excessive information flow. The breakdown of goliath economies brings to the fore the question of “how can what worked for decades which built such great global businesses, simply melt down?” The complexities of global warming, natural disasters to man-made ones are redefining priorities of countries and businesses. Technological advancements today can aid and abet attachment and detachment of cultures, personalise and depersonalise societies, engage and disengage nations.

19. These phenomenon are realities. In such paradoxical landscape, the paramount question is no longer quality of service, but truly what service is needed in a “moving target” of expectations. In the instance of the public service, the challenge is not about which wave of technology to go for, as much as it is where are the touch points of the public? It is about where the hot-bed issues are and how these touch the nerve and pulse of the public? What moves the masses, what pulls at the heart strings, but at the same time what is simply not for negotiation?

20. The speed of service and waiting time in our own hospitals must commensurate the quality of healthcare solutions for a society in a hurry, for instance. How do we serve the varying income profiles, growing middle class, emerging young society across the same infrastructure? The purchasing power in a society like Malaysia, where 35% of its youth are below 25 years, is immense. How we train and retain these talents will define the future of our society and the face of Malaysia in years to come.

VI. MALAYSIA'S GLOCAL AGENDA

Education

21. One of our key challenges today is in ensuring we enhance our education system, from pre-school through to tertiary. In a society like ours, education must no longer be a privilege, but a necessity. Literacy must be strengthened. Education we all know eradicates societies' ills. The National Registration Department in Malaysia is actively reaching out to areas where parents may not have registered birth of their child, or have registered for their identity cards, their MyKads.

22. Bottom line here is the child of a fisherman has an equal right to education as the child of a millionaire. They each must be given the level playing fields to compete. Their intellects and delivery must be the markers that define their destinies. The Ministries of Education and Higher Education are instituting rankings and grading of schools and universities to strengthen our education institutions.

Trade and Investment

23. As we provide education for all, we must ensure that employment is readily available too. We cannot afford an idle society. With the still volatile global economy, the inability of foreign companies to invest as freely due to tighter credit conditions, falling profits and rise in protectionism, Malaysia has to now create its own niche and own comparative advantage for FDI inducements, and national competitiveness. Economies like China, India and Vietnam which once lagged us have now overtaken us. The changing parameters have necessitated us to defreeze and re-shape our economic model, including our trade and investment policies.

24. The New Economic Model will be premised on innovation, creativity and value-added activities. It is predicated on human capital strength. The Government has invested much resource in the development of our five economic corridors, to create more jobs, expand our economic span and eradicate poverty. We have also invested in the development and expansion of our Halal industry and green energy which cuts across a broad spectrum of manufacturing and services activities. Tourism has been and continues to grow strongly as an important source of economic growth.

25. The Government has also undertaken several bold initiatives to boost Malaysia's competitiveness. We liberalised the equity ownership of foreigners in the services sectors. The scope and functions of the Foreign Investment Committee has been substantially rationalised. Foreigners are now allowed to hold 100 per cent equity in the 27 services sub-sectors. There is intense focus to promote domestic investments focusing on selected subsectors to be globally competitive.

26. At the global level, we will continue our commitment to a rule-based multilateral trading system and ensure that our market remains open and not fall to protectionist pressures. Complementing this effort is our strategic engagement in closer economic partnerships and FTAs. We are diversifying our exports to new and emerging markets.

27. The public sector could actively collaborate with its regional partners more. There could be transfer of knowledge and technology where relevant. We could promote cross fertilisation of talents, I feel, between our countries to improve our respective delivery systems. Improving government delivery system alone is incomplete without a parallel improvement in the private sector delivery system. Governments don't bring in businesses, private sectors do. Governments don't create all the jobs; that the private sector does, and even more.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Talent Management

28. Malaysia is working hard to reduce its reliance on low skilled foreign labours. The high income economic model drives towards investment in high skilled talents. Highly skilled talents are usually attractive to more than one market. The onus thus is to develop incentives to recruit and retain them. The best person for the job must be identified and remunerated. Mediocrity can no longer be tolerated. Speed in decision making and in execution is the salvation for Malaysia's future. Our Brain Gain programmes are moving intensely towards motivating Malaysian diasporas to contribute back to the development of Malaysia.

29. But this said, we are acutely aware that innovation and good talent attraction in organisations does not miraculously happen. They must be

created. There must be incentives and motivation towards this culture and conduct. In essence we must enable these conditions. The Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, MOSTI, have been tasked to developing an Innovation Centre. But beyond this we must create leaders who promote innovation. Who are able to be challenged and themselves challenge the way things are. We need leaders who will question why a policy, a science, a rule, a standard should still be applicable. We must ensure that frontline workers understand the big picture. We must ensure that agencies do not operate in isolation of the big picture, operating thus in silos of their own realities.

Graft and corruption

30. Against the backdrop of the transformed global realities, graft and corruption, is no longer a challenge, but a crusade to be fought with all our might. Corruption is not a vogue. It is not a Malaysian issue or a Haiti issue, nor is it a Singapore problem. It is a human problem. But while corruption is a problem we all share, it is robbing nations and societies of their full potentials and the opportunities they deserve. Corruption stunts growth and development, and what is worse it institutes a fear culture. The plague of corruption can happen anywhere, for the essence of corruption is led by man in his crib of character.

31. Often corruption takes place for two reasons: where the rules are ambiguous giving room to manoeuvring; and where there is lacking in character of individuals. The reality is that we cannot breathe down every man and woman's shoulders to see if they are toeing the line and doing the right thing. We must operate on trust. It is ultimately down to the person, his character, his being.

32. Severity of graft is not defined by if they are carried by the foreign media. Regardless of the size, one report is one too many. We have

made audit trails of transactions and decisions even tighter now in Malaysia that there must be trails of accountability at all levels of decision making.

33. I have received comments such as, “Tan Sri if you increased the pay of public officials there will be no corruption”. Really? How much is enough? Should it be to the levels of Wall Street? So why did Wall Street happen then? We must not confuse net worth to self worth. But often we do. It is here that the relevance and purpose of one’s choice of vocation cannot be overemphasised. We can have beaming careers but it may not be our vocations. Fundamentally, these are different I’d say. The choice of each ultimately lies in what we each want to be remembered for, not during our tenures, but after.

VII. MOVING PAST BEING BUREAUCRATS

34. Given these, so what is next for the Public Service of Malaysia? Our nexus of growth lies in us moving past being bureaucrats, being mandarin in our thinking and doing. This mindset would derail Malaysia progressing to its next stage of development, its next stable of potentials. Our organisations must have leaders who are able to help others realise their fullest potentials without themselves feeling intimidated. We must keep asking the basic questions of – What’s this race for? Where will it take us? Have we been down here before? When we do ask these hard questions, it may just lead us to the road less travelled, often the route to greater success and triumph.

35. Public sector all over the world has suffered the indictment of being branded larger than necessary, highly inefficient, costly to maintain and do not live up to service levels. But we have numerous public officials who work hard for their day’s bread; who work long

hours and over weekends. In these days of i-phones and blackberries, they respond from anywhere at anytime. There is a widespread assumption that public sector should adopt private sector's working modules of work ethics. But instead, the argument should be, public and private sectors must adopt the best practices in terms of cutting edge business practices and cost management. Performance itself has little to do with which side of the aisle you stand. It depends on a gamut of features such as – leadership, motivation, resources, skills, experience and exposure.

36. In driving transparency and accountability, all Ministries and agencies are to publish their client's charters, in their offices and websites. So, as a customer, if you are not served as promised you can demand the promised service levels. But the counter argument to this from our customers has been – well they still don't care. In the age of internet, email and blogs – I can assure you, that one cannot afford not to care.

37. Malaysia has a vibrant blogging community and a thriving internet media. This is a positive development as it provides openness in our society, and creates a debating society. But as technology hurtles forward, we must synchronise our progress with our principles. There must be accountability in journalism reporting which preserves the inherent rights and dignities of every individual. With the proliferating channels of communications, our own whole world view of criticism and complaints had to change in the public service. We can no longer be defensive when complaints reach our desks, nor can we afford not to reply to complaints. The highest ranking officer in every Agency and Ministry is today in charge of complaints, be that from the public, or media. They must take direct responsibility in ensuring its resolution.

38. We have also worked tirelessly to ensure public officials embrace the Vision of **"One Service, One Delivery, No Wrong Door."** As a customer, yours is to only knock the one door. That door should lead you to the solution. Agencies can no longer respond in their customary "not my agency" replies any longer. This has required sweeping change of mindset and culture within our institutions.

39. In February 2007, the then Prime Minister, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi called for the formation of PEMUDAH. PEMUDAH, the Special Task Force to Facilitate Business, comprises members from the public and private sectors, by name and personal to holder. The achievements of PEMUDAH are well documented and do not need much elaboration. In the three years since its formation PEMUDAH has achieved some significant milestones of changes in Inland Revenue, Immigration, Customs and in Housing and Local Government service delivery. We are now focusing on areas that may have indirect implications on business. Fundamental to the formation of PEMUDAH is – improvements in the public service is owned by the public and private sectors. PEMUDAH has brought about much understanding and aptitude towards market needs on both sides of the partnering allies; the private and public sector.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

VIII. SO WE ARE BLOATED AND INEFFICIENT

40. There continues to be much debate in Malaysia about the public service being bloated in numbers. No less debate on it having to be ethnically balanced. The Service today is dominated predominantly by Malays, followed by Chinese and Indians. Traditionally the Malays have always chosen to work for the Government, the Chinese in their family

businesses and Indians in the plantation sector. Over the years, this uninterrupted trend has resulted in the Service acquiring more of one race. This is not ideal by any means. We are working very hard to attracting good talents into the Service from all walks of lives, including from the private sector. But the discourse has to be bigger than whether we need big or small governments. It has to be – we need an efficient, better and speedy government. You can have the best racial proportions and a somewhat ideal number to the Service, but still be ridden by bad service.

41. Towards this end, the Honourable Prime Minister launched the Government Transformation Programme (GTP) which focuses on National Key Result Areas (NKRA) for improvement in six areas. The focused areas are in reducing crime, combating corruption, raising the living standard of low-income citizens, widening access to education, improving infrastructure in rural areas and upgrading public transportation. The GTP is committed to delivering this vision over three periods – short-term (2010-2012); medium-term (2012-2015); and long-term (2015-2020).

42. Improving our government can no longer be about fancy bells and whistles on our website – it needs to be focused on how to make that which is complicated simple, and that which is simple even simpler for our customers without compromising integrity of the service itself. It is in essence getting to the bare necessities of service, the simple bare necessities. The lyrics as is delivered in the movie, The Jungle Book are deep, yet the intent simple. We often miss how simple logic can solve seemingly great problems.

IX. COMMUNICATION – A PARADOX BROKEN

43. There was a time when public officials were seen and not heard. We learnt of things on a Need to Know Basis. We need only to know what we need to know. Today, it is still the same: Need to Know Basis; but with a twist. We must know all that is needed to know; failing which, we will have the 24-7 media and our customers all over us. This, by far, is the most dramatic change we have seen of officials in the last few years. They are empowered to interact with media, answer complaints within 24 hours and have their names and contact addresses in their responses, including personal e-mail addresses. Our senior officials write columns and editorial directly to our print and on-line media.

X. ABOUT THE SUBJECT OF CHARACTER

44. Improvements and modernisation are just elements of growth. They are not growth in essence. The fundamental to success, I believe is in building sound character. Character, is a project with no end. But character is the engine that defines it all. Where there is strength in character, you will have integrity, accountability, responsibility. Where there is soundness in character you will see truth and humility. We can expect transparency and dependability. A society that predicates its success on character development will see sustainable success. It won't be led by the impermanent illusion of position, money, fame and status. Fame, wealth, popularity are fickle and elusive. What always stays behind with us is our core, our character. A life based on the pursuit of good character brings about true purpose and meaning in all that we do in our lives, from the minuscule to the seemingly significant.

45. A public service which has officials recruited, trained, rewarded and groomed based on good character cannot but be of world class. It will be a Service that will base its decisions beyond its own periphery of reality. It will deliver the best for its constituents and stakeholders,

without foregoing integrity. In the words of Shakespeare – “this above all – to thine own self be true”.

XI. THE FINAL ANALYSIS LIES IN FLUENCY NOT HESITANCY

46. Technology that we saw in movies like Avatar and 2012, tells us of the egalitarian human mind. Its bounds are limitless just when you thought it could not go any further. What seemed novel once can be passé in a matter of moments. We live in extraordinary times. Societies have progressed towards conceiving ending premature deaths from AIDs and cancer. We are able to pragmatically devise programmes to end extreme hunger and poverty on the planet through incredible science, technology and medical advances and expansions.

47. But neither the depth of wealth nor extent of knowledge can ensure these successes and achievements, if the maturity of our public service delivery is not cultivated to match these developments. In a world that is fighting for survival and growth, every business and service is pushing towards creating its own, distinctive indescribable uniqueness. The essentials of public service when all is said and done, lies in the ostensibly simple actions and ordinary decisions which each and every public official make and take every day.

48. Sustainable success in businesses happens outside the balance sheet and remote from the accounts department. It happens through the emotional connections made with customers. People remember names, faces, places, service and moments. They hardly, if at all, recall numbers and financials. Public service has to be simply that.

49. The service offered must ultimately speak to varied audiences fulfilling assorted language of needs and expectations. The credence of our public service lies in the collective strength of the 1.2 million public officials. It lies NOT in the great inventions, but in the simple common

sense of service delivery; a service that is built and defined by the people it serves.

50. Between the markers, we all aspire for ordinary days with memorable lives. Excellence in our public service ultimately lies in how we can bring to all doors these ordinary days with extraordinary levels of service delivery. It has been said – “We all die. The goal is not to live forever. The goal is to create something that will.”

With that I thank you Singapore for inviting me.