

Who's best for job of civil servant and MP?

Time for a relook as Singapore's policy thrust and politics evolve
By *Andrea Ong, The Straits Times (Saturday, May 3, 2014)*

AT HIS book launch earlier this year, former civil service head Lim Siong Guan made a simple but profound observation.

Choosing the best person for the job is not an absolute carved in stone, as "meritocracy has to be with respect to who is best for the position to deliver what you expect of the position", he said.

The implication: As what is expected of a position changes, so too should the definition of merit and who is "best for the job".

I was reminded of what Mr Lim said after the Administrative Service's and People's Action Party's (PAP) potential new faces came under the spotlight recently.

Much has been made of how Singapore is at an "inflection point", with major developments like the social shift in policies and the changing face of local politics.

But one aspect that may have been glossed over is that these changes have huge implications on what public servants and politicians are now expected to deliver.

This calls for a fundamental rethink of what merit means, both in terms of who is "best for the job" and how they can emerge.

The roles of public servants and politicians should not be conflated, but it seems to me that in rethinking what being "best for the job" means, both entities face similar challenges.

One is whether their definitions of merit allow for enough diversity and plurality.

As authors Donald Low and Sudhir Thomas Vadaketh note in the introduction to their new book *Hard Choices: Challenging The Singapore Consensus*, as Singapore's operating context becomes more complex and the polity becomes more heterogeneous, there should also be an increase in the diversity of ideas considered.

The other challenge is whether those deemed to be best for the job can avoid the perception of being out of touch.

Speaking during the Budget debate in March, Potong Pasir MP Sitoh Yih Pin cautioned that such a perception can lead to communication breaking down as "people around you cannot see themselves having an engaging relationship with you that is based on mutual understanding and respect".

These challenges affect the public service and the ruling party in different ways. Take the public service. A longstanding issue has been that the thinkers who formulate policies - often scholarship holders and Administrative Service officers - are frequently viewed as more valued than the doers who do the implementing.

However, it is becoming increasingly apparent that this artificial divide is not viable. At the Administrative Service dinner in March, Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam and civil service head Peter Ong took pains to remind officers of the importance of policy implementation and execution.

The ability to execute policies well will become even more crucial as the Government rolls out more social measures like the Pioneer Generation Package, where policies are only as good as the tangible benefits that people feel.

Such measures will require authentic knowledge of how Singaporeans lead their daily lives, compassion and the human touch. They also call for different perspectives, backgrounds and skills from a public servant who formulates big-picture policies for trade and the economy - traditionally seen as the more prestigious Administrative Service postings.



Moulmein-Kallang GRC MP Denise Phua told The Straits Times earlier this year: "In a day and age where ideas are a dime a dozen, the key people who are going to make a difference are the ones who turn them into reality."

The question is whether such doers are recognised for their merit, and if those with different backgrounds and abilities can enter and prove themselves in the upper echelons of the public service.

What's encouraging is that the public service appears to be aware of these changing expectations and is evolving to meet this different policy environment.

Public Service Commission chairman Eddie Teo, for instance, has been championing the need to recruit students from diverse backgrounds as scholarship holders.

Mr Teo told The Straits Times last month that he sees positive changes in younger officers. They are more keen to take on operational postings and are more interested in joining the social sector, not just the economic. "I like to think that this is the result of changes in Singapore - that our younger officers now worry more about social issues and have an intrinsic empathy for the ground, and a more caring attitude towards the less fortunate," he said.

On the other hand, the changing expectations of politicians, particularly those from the ruling party, are less easy to decipher.

The PAP recently broke with tradition by allowing potential new faces to be seen in action at constituency events much earlier in the election cycle than usual.

The move is in line with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's pledge of a "new PAP for a new era" after the 2011 General Election, when he highlighted the need for a more diverse slate and for candidates to be tested out on the ground earlier. Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen, the PAP's organising secretary, also said recently the party especially values candidates with grassroots experience.

It would appear that the PAP is responding to signals from the electorate that the past formula of excellent qualifications is no longer enough to be considered "best for the job" of an MP.

Last year's Punggol East by-election was a good example of how people's expectations have changed. Voters rewarded the Workers' Party (WP) for fielding a young woman with a heartlander background, who had proven herself by rising through the party ranks and walking the ground over two election campaigns. In contrast, the PAP man was viewed as the usual high-flying professional who had been parachuted in at the last minute.

Fast forward to today, and the potential PAP new faces who have been soft-launched - they include a lawyer, research scientist and economist - are already facing similar criticism for being cast from the same mould and the same old definition of merit.

On one level, voters do appear to value politicians who are "one of us", someone they can relate to as an equal rather than in a top-down fashion. But I would argue that voters' expectations are more complex than that.

One phenomenon in 2011 was that opposition parties were lauded for fielding high-fliers and elite former scholarship holders, while the PAP was slammed for being out of touch when it trotted out candidates of a similar ilk.

It is not just a matter of double standards. In Singapore's political context, the high-flier who joins the opposition can symbolise, to the voter, courage and the willingness to buck the trend.

Conversely, the WP's decision to field Ms Lee Li Lian over more conventionally qualified WP members can also be read as a sign of conviction and commitment.

What this says to me is that voters also expect politicians to appeal to their ideals, such as by displaying moral courage or passionate commitment.

I would argue that even as the PAP casts its net wider for candidates who fit these changing expectations, it should also dig deeper for that spark of boldness and conviction. This means looking beyond a person's background and paper qualifications for other qualities such as empathy, lots of heart, and the drive to truly connect with people and patiently till the ground. These are attributes it should play up in a decisive way, beyond the pragmatic image of technocratic excellence that it has honed over the years.

In this brave new world of governance and politics, that may well be the new definition of merit and "best for the job".