

**THE WORKERS' PARTY YOUTH WING  
MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD ESSAY COMPETITION 2020**

**1<sup>st</sup> Prize**

**DIRECT DEMOCRACY FOR RESPONSIVE GOVERNMENT  
By Phang Zheng Xun**

*Abstract:*

*Swiss popular initiatives are probably the fastest and most democratic way to make laws and policies. They are a vital safeguard against government intransigence and incompetence.*

Niels Bohr allegedly remarked that prediction is very difficult, especially if it is about the future. It may be wise to heed that advice. Extrapolation from the present can result in a wildly inaccurate forecast of the future challenges Singapore might face.

However not all hope is lost. While we may not foresee the challenges that lie ahead, Singapore is still prepared to tackle them so long as the government is responsive to the needs of its citizens.

The PAP government came into power by representing the interests of ordinary citizens. Today it is not responsive to the frustrations and anxieties that citizens experience. For example, the recent election has highlighted various concerns<sup>1</sup> such as:

- Expensive homes or lease decay of HDB homes
- Expensive healthcare or nursing care
- Insufficient or inaccessible retirement savings due to low wages or rigid CPF rules
- Education that is stressful, elitist and may not provide relevant skills for the future
- Excessive immigration due to unfair trade agreements or poor oversight
- Perceptions of nepotism, cronyism or lack of transparency in policymaking and official appointments

What is particularly troubling is that all these problems have persisted for a generation, but the government has been slow to acknowledge them, let alone respond to them sufficiently.

Take education policy for example. In 1981, Tan Cheng Bock challenged Goh Keng Swee on the policy of streaming in schools. Dr Tan was worried that it will divide society.<sup>2</sup> In 2002, Jack Neo criticized streaming in his film "I Not Stupid" which attracted public approval. But it was not until 2008 that the EM3 and Special streams were abolished. The Normal stream will not be scrapped until 2025.

Intransigence can also be found in labour policy. In 1999, Tan Cheng Bock challenged George Yeo on his foreign talent policy during the Asian Financial Crisis.<sup>3</sup> Over the years, many

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<sup>1</sup> [www.facebook.com/LeeHsienYangSGP/posts/2675623136011112](https://www.facebook.com/LeeHsienYangSGP/posts/2675623136011112)

<sup>2</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=5E\\_cPy\\_50Do](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5E_cPy_50Do)

<sup>3</sup> [www.tanchengbock.org/in-the-press/think-singaporeans-first-debate-1999](http://www.tanchengbock.org/in-the-press/think-singaporeans-first-debate-1999)

commentators such as Gilbert Goh and Raymond Koh have warned about unfair employment practices and PMET retrenchment. But it was only recently that MAS has reached out to Mr Koh for his views and suggestions.<sup>4</sup> And it was not until the PAP suffered electoral setbacks in 2011 and 2020 that they began to pay lip service to this problem with Fair Consideration Framework and SkillsFuture. Unfortunately, FCF is too little too late, while SkillsFuture is based on a misdiagnosis of the causes of PMET unemployment.

A country has little prospect of overcoming future challenges if the government is dragging its feet in dealing with present challenges.

## Causes of Intransigence

There may be various reasons why policymakers (i.e. politicians and civil servants) are slow to respond to citizens' needs. One reason is a mindset of complacency or fear of the unknown, which is best described by a former MOE policy officer as follows:<sup>5</sup>

A very common refrain from MOE is that because "our education system has served us well" and that "there is no need for an overhaul, only tweaks". My humble suggestion is to say that maybe our education system has served us far worse than we had realized ... the persistent unwillingness to talk about overhauls is unhelpful in talking about making genuine and sustainable changes for the sake of our children.

Such a fear of change overlooks the fact that change can be safer than the status quo. We should not be afraid to "rock the boat" in order to save it from sinking.

A second reason is groupthink. Louis Ng gave a speech in Parliament on 27 Feb 2018 that confirmed what many knew all along: civil servants are afraid to pose contrarian views as it might harm their career prospects.<sup>6</sup> When policymakers ignore or refuse to seek out dissenting opinions, they mistakenly believe that their analyses are correct. Philip Yeo once advised top civil servants to "go into the field, visit the companies and spend time with the workers" but many prefer to hold meetings and presentations, and become isolated from the real world.<sup>7</sup> This warning should also apply to all politicians, especially those who rarely speak to constituents after an election.

A third reason is bureaucracy. It undermines the government's ability to listen to its citizens. Tan Kin Lian's feedback on numbering bus stops is a good example. The Transport Minister told Mr Tan that LTA officers will look into his suggestion and reply.<sup>8</sup> LTA replied about 2 weeks later, not to comment on Mr Tan's feedback, but to ask him to "list down the specific questions or area of interest" for their review.<sup>9</sup> So it appears that simple feedback was lost when forwarded from the minister to LTA officers.

A fourth reason, which is closely related to the first two, is that the most influential policymakers have no skin in the game. They also have no idea how terrible their policies are since they rarely suffer the consequences. Hence, they have little motivation to make policy changes that

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<sup>4</sup> [www.onlinecitizenasia.com/2020/08/21/only-now-did-mas-decide-to-reach-out-to-retired-banker-to-get-his-views-on-growing-sg-core](http://www.onlinecitizenasia.com/2020/08/21/only-now-did-mas-decide-to-reach-out-to-retired-banker-to-get-his-views-on-growing-sg-core)

<sup>5</sup> [www.facebook.com/notes/yann-wong/10155542204141302](https://www.facebook.com/notes/yann-wong/10155542204141302)

<sup>6</sup> [mothership.sg/2018/02/mp-louis-ng-public-servant-budget-speech-parliament](https://mothership.sg/2018/02/mp-louis-ng-public-servant-budget-speech-parliament)

<sup>7</sup> [www.thepeakmagazine.com.sg/interviews/former-edb-chairman-philip-yeos-latest-book-sheds-light-leadership-pitfalls](http://www.thepeakmagazine.com.sg/interviews/former-edb-chairman-philip-yeos-latest-book-sheds-light-leadership-pitfalls)

<sup>8</sup> [www.facebook.com/kinlian/posts/4241846499221303](https://www.facebook.com/kinlian/posts/4241846499221303)

<sup>9</sup> [tklcloud.com/Feedback/feedback2.aspx?id=3430](http://tklcloud.com/Feedback/feedback2.aspx?id=3430)

citizens want. Even if they are motivated to take instructions from citizens, they do not seem to understand what citizens want. They are unable to empathize with ordinary citizens as they have spent most of their fast-tracked careers in government on high salaries.

## **Solution**

If politicians and civil servants are incompetent at policymaking, then there is only one other safeguard: let citizens make policy. To that end, politicians should amend the Constitution to introduce popular initiatives like those in Switzerland.

Under a popular initiative in Singapore, all citizens can propose changes to the law:

- A nationwide vote must be held if 30,000 citizens (about 1% of all citizens) sign a proposal within 2 years. Anyone who opposes the proposal can present a counter-proposal, including the government, but no one can block a vote.
- To prevent fraud like in the 2013 Malaysian elections, no citizenship shall be granted to individuals older than 21 years (or whatever the prevailing voting age is), from the time any proposal collects the required number of signatures, to the time a vote is held.
- When a simple majority of citizens vote for the proposed law, it automatically takes effect on the same day. All other laws shall be void to the extent of their inconsistency with the new law. It follows that a popular initiative can only be repealed or replaced by another one.

The last rule may not sit well with lawyers because Article 4 of the Constitution declares it to be the supreme law of Singapore. However, a law cannot be the supreme law simply because it declares itself to be so. Otherwise any Act of Parliament can become the supreme law by such a self-declaration. The Constitution is supreme only because people recognize it as such, and the people can change their minds.

Popular initiatives make sense because ordinary citizens are in a better position to make policies than conventional policymakers. Citizens are better informed about what they want, what trade-offs they are prepared to make, and what the effects of policies are. Citizens with varied backgrounds are resistant to groupthink. They also have skin in the game.

One does not need to be dissatisfied with the PAP in order to support popular initiatives. Even if policymakers are now perfectly competent at their job, they may not forever be so, and popular initiatives help to curb the excesses of the government. Elections are not an effective check, because they are held only once every 5 years, by which time much damage can be done by bad policies. Judicial review has also not been an effective check, because courts are usually reluctant to question the merits of a law or government decision.

Some people may oppose popular initiatives because the majority of citizens could vote for short-sighted policies. Taking this logic further, are we to abolish elections in case citizens vote for opportunistic politicians? Or ban people from driving cars in case they get into accidents? Such a patronizing attitude is a recipe for tyranny. Even if a law or policy can be objectively proven to be short-sighted, citizens are entitled to disagree. The elites have no right to impose their opinions on others, as the country belongs to all citizens and not just the elites.