

Taking a DIY approach to dialogue and debate

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Insight

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AS THE festive and excessive feasting over Chinese New Year petered out, democracy got a workout of sorts this past week.

At two separate forums, Singaporeans here and abroad exercised their right to speak up by giving suggestions on how to make the country a better place.

In one session, some 350 people, mostly students, gathered at the National University of Singapore to exchange views with six panellists on what Singapore politics would be like in 2030.

Ideals and aspirations - wishes for a more open society with alternative media, views and political parties - ruled.

In the other discussion, 30 Singaporeans reacted to this year's Budget, in a two-hour Internet chat organised by the Government's revamped feedback unit, Reach.

Coping with the daily grind - the threat of higher transport costs, whether there was sufficient help for the low-income and handicapped, and skyrocketing public housing prices - took centre stage.

Three government office-holders, including Minister of State (Finance and Transport) Lim Hwee Hua, were present in cyberspace to assuage worries and explain the rationale behind policies.

The benefits of such dialogues are obvious.

For policymakers, inputs from the dialogues can be used in the crafting and fine-tuning of policy. For everyone else, they are a barometer of what matters to Singaporeans.

Young people, especially, benefit from the exposure to mature, constructive and well-thought-out ideas that can help shape their own world views.

The question is: Can more such public discussions be held?

Currently, public debates are usually policy-related, with the Government taking the lead.

It has provided numerous channels where Singaporeans can give their feedback, like Reach.

Public forums with ministers and MPs are held often, especially after major policy announcements - like when the Central Provident Fund system was overhauled last year.

Or when a minister visits a constituency, like when Transport Minister Raymond Lim visited Thomson in October, and got an earful from residents angry that more funeral parlours would be built in their estate.

Detractors criticise the Government's forums for being stage-managed - at some forums, participants are invited from a select pool, while at others, they might be too scared to speak their minds in front of the Cabinet who's who, and so on.

But if previous sessions and the one at Reach are anything to go by, the conversation can get pretty candid.

One Lu Kee Hong asked how the Health Ministry's budget could be focused more on providing quality care rather than 'five-star hotel-style lobbies or toilets' in hospitals.

Joelle Chong, who was among the participants who quizzed the office-holders on measures to help the needy, had this to say to Mrs Lim, when she cited the array of cash handouts:

'Okie...thanks Hwee Hua, but what about the handicapped?'

Too casual for conservative Singapore?

Not so for Mrs Lim, who continued with her measured, detailed responses, unperturbed. Indeed, such engagement between politicians and people is something Singapore should be proud of - as according to American political scientist Amy Fried, it is a hallmark of a democracy in tip-top condition.

In such systems, citizens will use other means besides voting to communicate their desires and policy preferences to elected officials. In turn, elected officials will engage in reasoned debate designed to convince others of the validity of their points of view, said the associate professor in a University of Maine magazine six years ago.

Having said that, there is a case to be made for a do-it-yourself (DIY) approach to dialogue and debate, in the spirit of exploring possibilities for policy adjustments.

Civil society groups have done well in this respect, whether it is to discuss animal welfare, foreign workers' rights or saving the environment.

For instance, Unifem Singapore held a regional conference three years ago to lobby for laws banning child sex tourism. Singapore passed such measures a year later.

The NUS forum, organised by the political science department and in its fifth year, is noteworthy for being among the few forums that focus on more narrowly political - as opposed to social - issues.

A few among the six who spoke, such as media academic Cherian George and writer Catherine Lim, also have personal blogs and websites, where they post their views. Politically passionate people like them are a useful link in the political education of young Singaporeans, although admittedly for older Singaporeans, much of what these political observers say may be old hat.

Their viewpoints, like those of other civil society activists, give an additional perspective to young people's understanding of Singapore.

Whether or not you agree with them, these commentators articulate their views clearly and well, which is not always the case in blogs and online forums. In some sites, the views posted are critical just for the sake of being anti-establishment.

Having citizens with a more rounded grasp of how Singapore works can only be good for fuller policy debates in the future.

It will also contribute to greater political openness, which, Dr Lim argued, would help Singaporeans cement their sense of identity and loyalty to the country, not just the place. And, really, there is nothing like a constant flow of views and ideas to aid a democracy in staying healthy.

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BETTER EXCHANGE

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