Singaporeans want greater say, latest poll shows

But few actually make known their views on public policy to Govt

BY MELISSA KOK

SINGAPOREANS want to have a greater say and be more involved in the political process and policymaking compared to 12 years ago, according to a new study.

Yet, the study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) found that when it came to actually making their views on public policy issues known to the Government, just 8 per cent actually did so.

The survey, done over a year ago, found that 85 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that “voting gave citizens the most meaningful way in which to tell the Government how the country should be run”.

This compared to 72 per cent who felt this was the case in 1998, when the same question was posed in a survey.

Political observer Eugene Tan of the Singapore Management University (SMU), contacted for his views on the findings, said the trend pointed to a more active citizenry and suggested that Singaporeans increasingly expect to be consulted on major policy matters.

“It means that the ‘we know more than you’ approach in policymaking is out of sync with (their) aspirations. Singaporeans want to be ‘talked with’ not ‘talked to’ by the Government.”

The survey involved face-to-face interviews with 2,016 citizens aged between 21 and 64, among whom 12 per cent were new citizens.

Conducted between February and May last year to study the emotional bonds of Singaporeans to the nation, this National Orientations of Singaporeans (NOS) survey has been done roughly every five years since 1993.

Aside from the value respondents saw in the vote, 93 per cent of them felt there should be other channels for citizens to express views on policies – significantly higher than the 79 per cent in 1998.

On whether citizens, regardless of education and income levels, should have equal freedom to express views on policies, 97 per cent agreed – up from 87 per cent in 1998.

And even when it came to the need for the Government to make quick decisions, 97 per cent of the respondents said there should be consultation.

But explaining why just 8 per cent made their views on policy issues known to the Government, Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser of the Sociology Department at the National University of Singapore (NUS) – one of the researchers behind the study – said a possible reason was the high percentage, 88 per cent, who said they had “no strong views”.

The SMU’s Mr Tan, on the other hand, said the findings could indicate the “limited faith in the effectiveness of the other channels of engagement”.

“It would appear that Singaporeans feel the ballot box is the only effective way of engaging the Government, and that all other modes of engagement are lacking in efficacy,” he said.

The top three main channels to express political views remained the Meet-the-People sessions held by MPs, direct communication with government agencies and writing to the forum pages of newspapers.

The findings on political participation aside, the survey also found that the level of national loyalty and pride inched up and was at a “healthy and stable” level.

But the sense of loyalty and pride was weaker among the more educated, higher-income groups, the young and the politically alienated.

The study’s authors – IPS senior research fellow Gillian Koh was the other – suggested that this was because those who were more highly educated and better off were likely to be widely travelled, and so more exposed to the cultures of other countries.

“So, although they are proud of Singapore, they find it hard to support a statement that it is the absolute best and that it holds a monopoly on positive qualities,” Prof Tan explained.

IPS research fellow Leong Chan Hoong – who was not involved in the study – said the finding that this group scored lower on loyalty and pride could be due to their having fewer opportuni-

National loyalty ‘at healthy level’

Two in three concerned about impact of foreigners

SINGAPOREANS think the Government should bring in foreigners when the economy needs them, but they also have concerns about the impact of foreigners working here if the economy needs it — said yet.

This question was not asked in the 1994 survey. Sociologist Tan Em Ser, an associate professor in the Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore and also an IPS faculty associate, explained the apparent contradiction in the survey findings.

He said that when it comes to foreigners coming here, Singaporeans make a distinction between how they are affected as individuals and as a collective.

“These citizens and employees, we may have a somewhat dour orientation towards having an influx of foreigners, but as investors and consumers, we may be more welcoming of them,” he said.

“I reckon Singaporeans would resolve this contradiction by taking the stand that we understand the need for bringing in foreigners, but they must not be allowed to threaten my job, my space, my comfort zone, my sense of security and the Singaporean way of life,”

“Would these threats remain, we would expect some degree of tension to prevail,” he said.