Singapore should become a continuous meritocracy, said Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam in a recent interview. Elgin Toh explores what it means and what it would take to make that transition.

In 2010, four out of 17 permanent secretaries were non-scholars, he noted. Last year, six in 10 statutory board CEOs did not hail from the Administrative Service.

**Barriers**

*WHILE the most obvious barrier to continuous meritocracy may appear to be employers, since they are the ones making hiring and promotion decisions, observers say they are seldom as insidious as the more imposable impediments: the employee or job seeker himself.*

A risk-averse employee might resist a change in job role recommended by his employer – even though that could work in favour of his personal development, noted Mr Wong.

Quite often, these barriers begin forming when someone is still in school – which explains Mr Tharman’s repeated reference to schools in his comments.

He said: “We have students who go through our education system, those who are doing well, who are very aware of their strengths… We have another group that goes through the system very aware of their weaknesses… They got into a certain stream or didn’t get into a school of choice.”

In Jason Tan’s view, the National Institute of Education (NIE) notes how the former group tends to get a puffed-up sense of self-importance, while the latter group develops a sense of helplessness. This potentially paralyses them for life and dampens their will to strive.

One group that reaches out to such students is the Child-

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Simple Acts of Courtesy

DPM Tharman has painted an inspiring picture of what society can and should be. And we may not know when this can be achieved, but to me, what’s important is for Singaporeans to strive towards it in our everyday lives, by showing a little respect and kindness to those around you, to your neighbours at the lifts, to the servers at the coffee shops, to the bus captains we meet and so on.

— PAP MP Liang Eng Hwa (Holland-Bukit Timah)

Right direction

TO BE sure, Mr Tharman’s comments have attracted some scepticism. But Mr Liang said the DPM’s comments are only the latest in a series beginning with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s speech at the opening of Parliament in 2011, in which he pledged to fight social stratification.

Others, like Mr Low, see Mr Tharman’s words as an attempt to improve Singapore’s meritocracy without addressing fundamental objections to it. He sees meritocracy on its own as “limited notion of justice and fairness” and it should therefore be complemented by a “high amount of state support for those of lesser ability” — which in turn is contentious.

STILL, most people, including Mr Low, agree that the latest comments represent a step in the right direction. Even Mr Yee, who is from the Workers’ Party, said he agreed completely with Mr Tharman’s call for a more continuous meritocracy.

Added SMU’s Mr Ho: “The things he said were very over-due.”