

## Why Singapore needs more naysayers

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Singapore needs more people to speak up and challenge authority, said a panel of academics and former senior civil servants yesterday.

They lamented the reluctance of civil servants to pose contrarian views when facing political office-holders, and the reticence of university students in asking questions at conferences.

But this ability to question views and policies is vital if Singapore is to do well in the next 50 years, said the speakers at a one-day forum with the theme of unintended consequences in Singapore.

Said Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy dean Kishore Mahbubani, 68: "We need more naysayers."

He argued that Singapore cannot take its formulas for success developed over the last 50 years and apply them to the next 50 years, as the



The ability to question views and policies is vital if Singapore is to progress further, said panellists at the forum. Speakers were (from left) Mr Han Fook Kwang, Prof Kishore Mahbubani, Prof Tommy Koh, Prof Chan Heng Chee and Prof David Chan. PHOTO: COURTESY OF SMU

world has changed drastically.

"We need to create new formulas, which you can't until you attack and challenge every sacred cow. Then you can succeed," he added.

Panellist and behavioural scientist David Chan jokingly addressed civil servants in the audience, saying: "You talk so much to me but when the minister is present, in front of him, you're absolutely silent."

This habit stems partly from a fear of looking bad in front of others

and of failing, added Prof Chan, 50. He heads the Singapore Management University (SMU) Behavioural Sciences Institute, which organised the conference that was attended by 350 people.

Mr Han Fook Kwang, 63, the editor-at-large of The Straits Times, said Singapore became so successful in such a short time that its people became too risk-averse.

For instance, policymakers are unwilling to take bigger risks with policies and fear that making ma-

major mistakes will cause Singapore to lose it all, he added.

But it is in policies and leadership teams that Singapore needs people willing to challenge authority, said Professor Chan Heng Chee, who is in her 70s and chairs the Singapore University of Technology and Design's Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities.

She called for more robust internal discussions on policies with a wider range of people from different backgrounds, adding: "We need

naysayers in leadership teams who can think the unthinkable."

Panellists also noted that Singaporean audiences tended not to ask questions at conferences, unlike people overseas, whose hands would shoot up as soon as academics finished their lectures.

In response, audience member and National University of Singapore sociologist Paulin Straughan said "the art of asking critical questions" can be developed in people. SMU, for instance, grades under-

graduates by how much they participate in class.

Above all, Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh, 79, felt that differing points of view should be valued.

He said: "When we appoint people to boards, we can also appoint challengers who are subversive and who have alternative points of view. That's the kind of cultural change we want to see. It makes Singapore stronger, not weaker."

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