

Speaker 2: Arun Mahizhnan

I do not subscribe only to theories in textbooks, though I have read enough of them; my views are shaped by the actual experiences I have personally undergone or observed very closely from my ringside seat. I will be drawing heavily from my direct exposure to Singapore’s cultural leaders and how they perform as leaders.

Organisational DNA

I have a simple understanding about organisations. The DNA of every organisation has three genes — ideas, systems, and people. For the organisation to be good, all three genes must be good and function well together.

Therefore, cultural organisations too need good ideas, good systems and good leaders. In my book, good ideas are a dime a dozen. They are not as rare as people make them out to be. What is more difficult is to build good systems to implement those ideas. What is most difficult is to find the good people, especially the good leaders, to work the system and carry out the good ideas. Today, I will focus on good systems and good leaders for cultural organisations.

Government system

Let me first take the Singapore government and its cultural agencies as the system. Is it a good system for cultural development? The short answer is, it is good, but far from good enough.

The entire Singapore government structure is mostly a legacy of the British colonial empire and the subsequent parliamentary system. As such, I find the system severely handicapped. The Singapore cabinet and the administrative service have systemic, built-in limitations in developing and deploying the right leaders for the right domains within the government.

The organising principle of the Singapore government is primarily based on “administration by generalists”. Lately, it appears to be “administration by generals”, going by the number of military men in civilian administration. I believe

that governing Singapore has become so complex and challenging that it is in dire need of domain knowledge and specialisation in many areas of governance – in addition to the generalist perspective.

The very small number of cabinet posts prevents the government from appointing a domain specialist for each ministry. Unlike the American system, or even in some other Commonwealth systems, our cabinet ministers need to be elected. The nature of the electoral process demands that office-holders are politically savvy and electable first, and then rotatable among various ministries. As far as I can recall, only the Ministry of Law seems to have had a professionally qualified minister all through these 60-odd years. No other ministry is deemed to require a domain specialist. This situation is still tolerable if the minister is served by able specialists in the administrative service.

When we look at the administrative service, where numbers are not the constraint, the Singapore system deliberately chooses the path of the generalist administrator. Though there are the rare few permanent secretaries who are specialists, such as Kishore Mahbubani and Bilahari Kausikan who had only worked in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs all their lives and rose up from the ranks to become permanent secretaries of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the overwhelming majority of the administrative service officers — from permanent secretaries, deputy secretaries, senior directors, to the director levels — are generalists and have little or no domain knowledge or experience until they are appointed to their posts. This is an extraordinary system because in most other jobs in our lives, the first thing that is demanded is relevant qualification or experience or, preferably, both. The administrative service does not play by those rules. It is assumed that rookie administrative officers are capable of mastering the brief, any brief, in short order because they have about 15 years of academically brilliant educational record under their belt. It is assumed that they will do the job at a high level of competence in the next three or four years before being posted to the next unfamiliar domain. It is also assumed that by such frequent rotational assignments over the next 15 years or so, the officers will be ready to take on top positions in ministries because they have become well rounded.

In the last 47 years of my work life, I have had the honour and privilege of getting to know some extraordinary ministers and permanent secretaries. I will mention two.

Goh Keng Swee was an economist by training but he was a magician as a minister. Whatever he touched, he turned into something exceptional and enduring. Not that

he made no mistakes, but his intellectual and administrative gifts were such that he stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Lee Kuan Yew as the co-builder of Singapore. The other is J. Y. Pillay, an engineer who became a permanent secretary, who outdid most other permanent secretaries not only in government but also in quasi-government organisations and the private sector, making Singapore Airlines the best airline of the world. I should add one more – Professor Tommy Koh, who is strictly not a civil servant but seconded to the government. Trained as a lawyer, promoted to the deanship of the law faculty at the National University of Singapore, he became a world-class diplomat, a global thought leader in environmental issues, an outstanding patron of the arts, a champion of the disabled and many things more. All these three leaders had little domain knowledge or prior experience in the many areas they later excelled in. These three examples may then disprove my basic point that one needs to be a specialist in order to do the job well. Because of them, it may be argued — indeed, it has been argued — that many ministers, many permanent secretaries, or many diplomats could do what these three men had done, and we have seen many appointments that reflect that thinking. How deleterious some of these appointments have been! Not all, for sure, but many have been underwhelming in their performance.

The reason is obvious. Government business has become so big, so complex, and so unpredictable that we need to look at a different model of administrative service. If ever the government was simple enough to be run by generalists, it is not any more. The system is congenitally weak. I am not arguing that we must get rid of generalists. On the contrary, my own idea has been — which I first put forward in the early 1990s, after working at least a decade each in the public and private sectors — that we must reconfigure the administrative service to have a “dual-track” system whereby generalists and specialists advance in the administrative service with equal rank and rewards. I can see that after decades of debate, some attempts have been made in this direction and I am happy to note the setting up of the Public Service Leadership Programme that allows for specialisation and career progress. However, in my humble opinion, we have taken too long and made too little progress so far. Let me add that in many of the huge multinational corporations I worked with, most chief executive officers were from the same or similar industries and even when they are not, they were well served by managers with decades of industry experience and expertise. So, specialisation is very much part of their system.

It is because of this structural impediment in the administrative service that the culture ministry too has not been performing at optimal level.

Peculiarities of the Culture Ministry

The culture ministry, however, has some additional challenges, quite different from many other ministries. Therefore, I would suggest that in administering culture, the government should put culture on a strong footing, watch it with a sharp eye, but keep it at arm’s length. Let me explain briefly these anatomical exhortations.

Government should provide most of the infrastructure for the arts such as the Esplanade or the National Gallery, as the Singapore private sector is not able to undertake such burdens. There are no Singaporean Solomon R. Guggenheims yet.

Then the government should watch where culture and the arts are going and facilitate whenever they need subsidies or safety nets, and regulate wherever they cross the “red lines”.

However, when it comes to the day-to-day administration of the arts and culture, I share the view that the government should make a strategic retreat. Unlike education, health, housing, or transportation, there are no minimal or universal standards in culture and the arts. They are defined by diversity, individuality, and for the most part, non-conformism. Government administration and structures are especially suited to the former set of public services and especially unsuited to the latter. So, the government should outsource and distance itself as much as possible.

I have long advocated that government should keep cultural agencies once or twice removed. For example, when my committee drew up the blueprint for what is now known as the National Arts Council in 1989, we argued that the Council should not be a ministry department or division, it should not even be a statutory board. We recommended that it be set up as a company limited by guarantee, very much like the Institute of Policy Studies, reporting directly to the Culture Minister. Though our recommendation was at first accepted, the National Arts Council was later turned into a statutory board. Likewise, I had argued that even within the National Arts Council, the Arts Festival should be outsourced rather than be run by the National Arts Council. The main reason we argued for extensive autonomy was precisely because of the difficulties the government has been facing in each case. From the appointment of leadership jobs to the choice of programming to the way public criticism is handled, the customary government approach just does not work for this domain. I do not have time to go into the details but let me share with you a couple of personal experiences.

Mobil was the company that seeded the idea of the Singapore Arts Festival and helped shape it in its formative years. Having migrated from the civil service to Mobil in 1979, and having had first-hand experience with the then Ministry of Culture, I strongly felt the festival should have an experienced artistic director rather than be run by civil servants. I persuaded my management to pay for the potential artistic director's visit for a no-obligation trip to Singapore. There was much resistance from the Ministry but eventually they succumbed to the charms and talents of Anthony Steel, who became the first professional artistic director of the festival. Though the relationship did not last, the idea of professional leadership for the festival was established at that time. I am glad to see that that idea persists to this day. And our idea that the festival should be moved out of the National Arts Council has also come to pass. I would not say every festival since Anthony Steel's days has been great, but I would certainly submit the festival has reached much higher levels than it would have under the leadership of regular civil servants. I should mention here an anecdote that Steel used to cite. When asked who should the artistic director programme the Festival for, he was purported to have replied, *“The artistic director should programme the Festival for an audience of one — himself.”* While this is certainly an exaggeration, the basic fact remains that personal judgments, impulses, instincts, and a high level of risk-taking built on a solid foundation of years of watching, studying and analysing artistic productions are the qualities that mark a good artistic director. Very little in the training or work experience of an administrative officer prepares one for such a position.

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Let me add another example. When Mobil was the sponsor of the festival, we not only provided the funding but actually took over the chairmanship of the marketing committee. Why? Because neither the civil servant nor the artistic director could match the marketing skills and experience of private sector companies. Very few ministers and civil servants had to sell anything for a price to unwilling or disinterested buyers. And those who equate selling government policies to an

electorate to the selling of arts productions would seem to know very little about either politics or the arts. Though there are some similarities, there are vast differences.

Arts community

Now that I have sufficiently irked the government leadership, let me go on to do the same with the artistic leadership. Again, I will draw on my personal experiences.

I joined the board of The Substation at the personal request of Kuo Pao Kun whom I had known and admired from the time he was detained by the government because he was working in the same Radio Television Singapore where I started my career in the civil service. By the time The Substation was set up, I was in Mobil and he had invited me to join the board of directors despite the fact that I do not have an artistic bone in my body. Then T. Sasitharan took over as Artistic Director of The Substation and he too wanted me to carry on serving on the board. Later, when these two gentlemen established what is today known as the Intercultural Theatre Institute (ITI), they again invited me to the new board. After 17 years, I am now the Chairman of ITI, and I am still as unartistic as I had been in the 1980s. Even the highly artistic Tan Tarn How, who has rubbed shoulders with me every day over the last 10 years as a colleague in the Institute of Policy Studies, could not “artify” me, no matter how much he tried. Yet, he too, as a fellow board member of ITI, advised me to stay on the board. Why is this so? Because just like how a government agency cannot be confined to the administrative type, with the arts organisation, the leadership cannot be confined to the artistic type. I know I have been a thorn in Kuo’s side as well as Sasitharan’s, but they insisted that I should be around because I bring administrative experience to the table. My administrative judgments, instincts and impulses are decidedly different from Sasitharan’s but he sees the difference as an asset to ITI. And I’m not alone on the board in having differences. We have a “rain maker” who knows how to milk cash cows, a “financial wizard” who knows cash flow management and budgeting like the back of his hand, and a brilliant academic with decades of teaching and research experience which is at the heart of the Intercultural Theatre Institute’s mission. While none would claim artistic talent, they bring deep expertise to the table. The ITI board has such a multiplicity of talents in leadership positions just so it will function well as an arts organisation. However, the question is, “Do all arts organisations have such leadership?” Quite often, artists over-privilege the artistic process and under-privilege the administrative process. In

my view, they are shooting themselves in the foot. Just as artists demand that the government must have artistic sensibilities, the arts community should also recognise the need for administrative sensibilities.

Conclusion

Let me sum up with a few specific points.

The government can and should bring in more cultural literacy into the administrative service so that it can make informed and judicious decisions. However, as an elected government accountable to the public at large, it has severe limitations regarding where it can take risks. To expect the government to behave like artists or private sector entrepreneurs is naïve and simplistic. This is why an enterprise such as cultural and artistic development with high levels of subjectivity and risks need to be removed as far as possible from government administration, but not so far out as to be left in the cold to wither and die.

Second, the government should learn to respect and trust artists and non-governmental actors much more, and assume that they too are concerned about the well-being of Singapore as the government is. Dissent and divergence are not marks of subversion. Similarly, artists need to understand that no matter how perceptive or insightful they may be, they are not and cannot be the final arbiters of public good. Only the public can settle that. But artists can demand to be given a chance to convince the public but not to the extent where they cross the “red lines” drawn by the law of the land. So, they have to accept that a certain amount of caution and conservatism on the part of the government is endemic.

Looking to the future, I personally hope the leaderships in the government and the arts community would build on mutual respect and trust and serve the public better — which is the reason they both exist.