

CLC LECTURE

Bringing Different Communities Together: The People's Association Story

5 April 2018



The People's Association (PA) has been instrumental in building a harmonious and cohesive society in Singapore for over five decades. Today there are thousands of people involved in grassroots organisations and participating in various PA programmes. In achieving this success, the PA constantly remakes itself and develops new means of engaging communities in line with social change.

In this lecture, former PA Chief Executive Director Mr Tan Boon Huat will share some key initiatives he oversaw, including modernising community centres, introducing the Passion Card and leveraging business analytics to bring communities together. This lecture also covers how people can come together and interact across ethnic, age, social class, and cultural boundaries to form a cohesive society and liveable environment.

Lecture Segment

Jason Boh
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Today we are privileged to have with us Mr Tan Boon Huat, Former chief Executive Director of the People's Association [PA], to share with us his insights and experiences from his time at the PA in bringing communities together. So, the lecture will be followed by a curated Q&A [question and answer] session with the audience, which will be moderated by Ms Louisa-May Khoo, an adjunct senior assistant director at the CLC. So, kindly hold all questions till the Q&A session.

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With this, let us start the session, Mr Tan, please. (Applause)

Tan Boon Huat

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The basis of what I want to talk about is really my empirical experience. I would like to stress [that] it's **empirical**. I make no apologies if I may make some provocative statements—you don't have to agree to my views, feel free to challenge them if you'd like later.

I had two stints at the People's Association. First time was [19]77-'79 as a young admin officer. I joined service in '74, so after two years, I ended up at the PA. When I started, I was called the Assistant Director (Research and Statistics). Frankly speaking, there wasn't much research. It was all really statistics. But within a very short period of time, because there were many changes, I had to change my job and I became Director (Administration).

I had a very good mentor then, you know. There was a gentleman called Lim Chin Tiong, who was the Chief Executive then. He came from the foreign service, but he was a very good chap and he taught me a number of things. I mean he went out of his way as a chief, you know, to talk to a young officer and sort of advised me and tell [*sic* told] me how I could do my job better. But one of the best things he taught me really was the Confucianist [*sic* Confucian] way, which means [to take] the middle or the moderate course of action; don't take the extreme position; and you always give your opponent or your adversary an honourable way out. So, it's an important lesson to me. And 23 years after that, I returned in 2002 as the Chief Executive of the PA.

The main theme of my talk will be about community engagement, why and how the PA does it, some of the pluses, some of the minuses along the way; and maybe I'll also make some suggestions about what government agencies, you know, Singapore government agencies can do with the PA. Alright? This is an outline of the contents, the PA's objectives: what happened to PA, or PA from the beginning, the early years; how the grassroots movement evolved; how the activities and programmes also expanded and evolved. Then I'll go into the PAssion

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Card—I think most...I don't know, how many of you have a Passion card? Oh, very good, very good. Yeah. I'll talk about it. Why I went into the PAssion Card and its linkage with analytics, and maybe outline some of the challenges ahead.

One of the reasons why I like to talk about the origins and so on, which I think if you want to do something, if you want to go forward, you need to know where you are, of course you know your objectives, but it's always important to know where you came from and how you originated. Sometimes we forget that part, we just look forward; where we are, look forward, forget about the past.

Introduction to People's Association (PA)

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Now the PA is a very interesting and very unique organisation. Unique in many ways. One, there's no such other agency around the world. During my term as Chief Executive, quite a number of foreign visitors came through the PA, and I always asked them, "Have you, do you have something equivalent in your own country?" And actually, the answer is [usually] no.

The other interesting part about PA, and this applies to our local context, this is probably the only statutory board, where the Chairman by law is the Prime Minister. So, it's specified in the PA Act that the Chairman of the PA board is the Prime Minister, but he doesn't, you know, bother with day-to-day operations. He appoints a Minister or a Minister of State to be the Deputy Chairman, and the Deputy Chairman then is really the de facto person who manages day-to-day alongside with the Chief Executive and his staff. Okay? So, it's unique.

Now, it's good also to look at the objectives. You know, when you have many statutory boards and agencies, look at the objectives. It says "Organisation and promotion of group participation in social, cultural,

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educational, athletic activities for the people of Singapore, in order that they may realise that they belong to a multiracial community, the interest of which transcends sectional loyalties.” This is interesting. Then the other one, “Establishment of institution, et cetera...see the fostering of community bonding and so on and so forth.”

So, when I had foreign visitors and I tried to explain what we do with community bonding, CCs [Community Centres], RCs [Residents’ Committees] and so on, I mean they then to get quite confused, you know? So, I thought about it, I thought the best way to describe it, you know, in a sense, the function of the PA is like a Ministry of National Unity. Okay?

I think PA is not the only, you know, institution that creates, that helps bind the people together, or nation-building organisation. But I believe it is and will continue to be a key instrument of nation-building. I think this will go on forever.

One point I want to note now is that...I want to note now for you, to make clear that in Singapore, we’re not interested in becoming...we’re not a melting pot. I think public officers—particularly in this room—I think you should choose your words carefully. Sometimes we use it carelessly. What melting pot means is we don’t worry about our past, we just become one kind of people for the future. But if you listen very carefully, always, you know, our government leaders always say, “You preserve your heritage, your cultural heritage, but you look at your common space and we build a national identity that way.” Even I think yesterday I was watching the news, I think it was PM [Prime Minister] Lee at some clan association activities, he said “I would like the clans to teach your heritage, to maintain the heritage.” So, bear that in mind. Don’t use the word “melting pot”. I think sometimes our local journalists and all that use all these terms quite loosely—so, please, be careful.

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We have lots of diversity in terms of race, language and religion; but if you think about [it] carefully, there are other forms of diversity. And [with] the way we have evolved over the years, you'll find that our people actually go in different orbits. Even from kindergarten, you know. There are the people who go to the PCF [People's Action Party Community Foundation], NTUC [National Trades Union Congress] kindergartens, and those who go to the Eton school and all the private kindergartens. And the kids, you know, and the families, you move around a different orbit. Then of course, you've your ITE [Institute for Technical Education], poly[technics] and university, the orbits are also different—I mean nothing wrong that there are different social orbits, but this must be recognised, and we have to be sensitive about it and we have to **address** it. And I think this is one of the good functions...this is one of functions of the PA.

I recall an interesting anecdote; and I personally have a very interesting experience. I went overseas, when I came back after my undergraduate studies, I was exempted from military service for various reasons, for medical reasons. I felt guilty, so I joined the Volunteer Special Constabulary. So, I was assigned to CNB, the then-Central Narcotics Bureau. And my job, my team was to go and look for those people who fail to turn up at the urine tests—you know, you're supposed to come back and test urine. So, we went into somewhere in Bukit Merah, a one-room flat, banged on the door, the person wasn't there. A gentleman in about his forties was there, whole body tattooed. You look around the one-room flat, no furniture, one or two mattresses. On one mattress, about 60, 70 year-old very skinny man, whole body tattooed.

And I said, "Eh, in Singapore we have this kind of situation?" Because I didn't come from [a] very wealthy background, but still, you know, the middle-class kind of background. My social orbit was totally different. So, it was an eye-opener for me. So, one of the things that PA strives to do is to, you know, tell people of all walks of life that there are different orbits, we know them and PA will try to give people from different

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orbits...try to bring you together and understand that there's diversity, but [*sic* and] try to build up the common space.

Okay. You see, for PA to do its job, we do social, cultural, educational activities and so on and so forth, I want to stress [that] there's a difference between means and the end. These are the means. You can do many, many things to bring people together, to interact, build social capital as it were—but the end **must** be national unity. [We] must not confuse the means with the end. Sometimes, you know, we end up confusing the means and the end. Alright?

Background of People's Association

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Now, a bit more about the background. In the early years, you know, there was a communist threat, so what the government had done was...sorry, before that, in the post-war years, the British had a few community centres. As part of the reconstruction, they offered things like cooking classes, cleaning class[es], sewing classes and so on. I think when the new government came into power after '59, and I think LKY [Lee Kuan Yew] and his colleagues thought it was a good idea; and in fact, the CCs expanded. And at one stage, I think we had well over 200 community centres. And see, in those days, the typical sort of communist tactic was [through] the rural areas surround the city and then, you know, take over. Revolution.

So, this was an attempt at countering it. So, we have many, many CCs in those days, the rural area[s]. I think some of the younger ones and some of our foreign friends [are] looking around Singapore, you say, "What rural area have you had?" But we had rural areas in those days. And those CCs were simpler—I don't think we managed to get you one of those very old ones where it's timber picture, timber framed place, zinc roofed, the floor [with] hardly any concrete, you know. I think we couldn't find that kind of picture, but this is the best we could do. Those days, the CC names were like, you know, Ah Ma Keng, Yew Tee, Bah Soon Pa, all these rather exotic names.

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Alright, one of the key things in the CCs in those days was that the government managed to persuade the local leaders—could be the kampong heads, you know, the penghulu [Malay word for headman or village chief] types, the local business chap[s], some clan association people—to become members of the CC management committee [CCMC]. And this is very important, you know.

See, [here is] a picture of the Kampong Kembangan CC, 1960s. Sewing classes [were available] then also. You remember in the early days of industrialisation the garment industry was very important to Singapore, so like Wing Tai and so on and so forth, making jeans and so on. And there you see a picture of the late finance minister, Mr Hon Sui Sen. One of the reasons [why] we [are] show[ing] this picture was I wanted to say, between the early days and fast-forward to the time...oh, actually not fast forward, even in the late '70s, when I was in PA, he built the first million-dollar CC. This was Havelock CC. So, quite a big transformation from a very humble CC to million-dollar CC.

Partly as a result of that, you know, many other constituencies, everyone clamoured for the same treatment. So, I would say that one of the things I did before I left my first stint in the PA, was to work on a cabinet paper to say that we should give every constituency the possibility of a million-dollar CC. the government would be prepared to give you a grant of up to one million dollars, and then I think it was [a] matching grant up to another four hundred—one million for basic facilities, and about 400,000 more for additional facilities. So, after quite a lot of argy-bargy with the Ministry of Finance, we finally got that policy through.

Okay, you can see in PA, there are many Cs. There is CCMC, CCC [Citizen's Consultative Committee], RC and so on and so forth. And here's a quick timeline of how they developed and what happened over a period of time.

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I think getting the local community to be involved in the management of the CCs was a very clever stroke on the part of the founding fathers of Singapore. I mean, it can all be run by staff as it was done in the British days. But I think the missing ingredient is [*sic* was] ownership by the community. So, doing...he was very clever in doing this. But in those days, it started off with the local community leaders. I want to say that, you know, late Mr Lee Kuan Yew was very far-sighted, and he was always obsessed about succession—or another way of putting it in today's words [would be] about sustainability.

One of the reasons why I ended up in the PA in my first stint '77-'79 was because he saw that Singapore was transforming. A lot of people are...we're industrialising, many people were becoming professionals. There were less businessmen, more professionals—people were being educated at the local universities, [and] also foreign universities. So, what had happened then was he beefed up the PA admin service component from one or two to five. And the reason [why] he had us there was he wanted us to try to get more professionals to join the grassroots organisation. So, we spent a lot of time in those days visiting the professional organisation[s]; the architects, the engineers, the doctors, even the nurses and so on to get these organisations to try to ask their members to join the grassroots as well. And it has evolved quite well.

Originally, you know, after the 1964 riot, [the] PMO [Prime Minister's Office] formed goodwill committees. Then they became CCCs, still under PMO; but by 1993, they were also put and integrated with the rest of the PA.

Another interesting thing [is in] the late 70s, around the time I was there too, there was also a realisation that with resettlement, right, HDB [Housing & Development Board] resettlement and so on, the villages were being broken up. So, your local community leadership, community grassroots leadership, was also being broken up. So, that's why—this

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was Goh Chok Tong's time—we decided to start Resident's Committee[s]. So, there was an experiment, one of them was at Marine Parade. And after a while, you know, it took hold. But initially, the RCs were staffed by HDB staff, or staff under HDB, hired under [sic by] HDB. They may not be your HDB estate management staff, but they were hired by the HDB to do this. So, it started that way, but again, in the early '90s, they were absorbed by the People's Association.

Grassroots Organisations: Kampong Spirit

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Now, I want to stress that there's an interesting difference between the PA grassroots people and the voluntary welfare organisation [VWO] [and] the NGOs [non-governmental organisations]. They have a role to play, I'm not saying that...I'm not running them down. The VWOs have a quite...narrower focus, usually the disabled or less well-off, they look after [them]. NGOs may have a particular interest whether it's animal rights or, you know, women's rights, or whatever, that's fine. But one interesting thing about the GROs [grassroots organisation] is right from the beginning, they're imbued with the kampong spirit, the kampong self-help spirit, the gotong royong. Remember in the early days when they were building, you know, mobilised the community to start building their own roads, help lay out the water pipes and things like that. Okay? So, [we are] imbued with this kind of a spirit.

And along the way, things changed. I mean today, my time and even now, I mean they've got Community Emergency Response Teams; they've got community on patrol, you know the police helped sponsor that; SCDF [Singapore Civil Defence Force] helps sponsor the CERTS [Company Emergency Response Team]. Maybe some of these worked very well because the other time common boss, you see. The Minister for Home Affairs was Wong Kan Seng, deputy chairman PA, was Wong Kan Seng as well. So, a lot of these things got going, and it's good.

And one example, the best example I can give you of this community mobilisation was during the SARS [Severe Acuter Respiratory Syndrome]

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period. Remember the SARS period? Because it was totally new, there were [*sic was*] a lot of fear going on [*sic around*], but we were able to mobilise the grassroots to do a number of things. We helped with contact tracing; we did the market temperature checks; distributed food to those who are [*sic were*] under quarantine; we distributed the SARS kits to almost a million households, you know? And all these...you see, because you involved this 30,000 or so grassroots leaders, I think that helps [*sic helped*] build that sense of confidence in the public. If it's all done by government agencies, or by civil servants or by police or civil defence, it has a different tenor to it. So, I like to think that because you involved the community so much, that people felt, eh, you know, good confidence that things are under control and things will get better.

And apart from this also the government organised quite a lot of community dialogues. So, this was done at the ground, and also there were places where we invited the senior grassroots leaders of every...from every constituency to come and listen to the government explain what was going on, what the next steps were, what the risks were, and so on and so forth in a very open and frank way. So, I think this builds, you know, that...it maintains that kind of morale and confidence.

Another impact of the resettlement was the HDB and the government policy of having ethnic quotas in the housing estates—breaking away from enclaves. That also is [*sic was*] interesting because it also changes [*sic changed*] the nature of the community leadership and community bonding. And because it's new people too, you know, it means we have to work on it to ensure that the minorities in these areas do not feel left out. In the past, they're together, you know, more of their own people, they don't feel so uncomfortable, but if you go to a place now where there are very few Malays or very few Indians, most of your neighbours are Chinese, and also different, I mean [*are*] new to you, you know, [*there was a*] sense of discomfort. So, in a way, that's why also the RCs and the way they work[ed] was important.

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And within the CCCs and the CCMCs et cetera, we have Women's Committees, Youth Committees and so on, quite a lot, minority committees and so on, interest groups. Alright? And in some ways, I used to tell people, PA had the largest retail chain in Singapore. We had a hundred plus community centres; we had about 600 residents' committee centres, you know—bigger than, you know, 7-Eleven or whoever it was at that time. We really had a big retail chain.

Changing with the Times: The Means and Ends

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Okay, we have many, many kinds of activities. In the old days, it was very simple. Life was simple, so a ping-pong table, a basketball court, even a television set was able to bring people down, [to] watch TV. I don't know whether some of you have seen the pictures, you know, [placing the] television in a metal box, because you're afraid that somebody makes away with the television, and not many people own a television set in those days anyway. So that, and even reading newspapers, these were things that brought people together.

But of course, over the years, it's totally changed now. Even in my time, for example, apart from yoga and other activities which are more up market and more modern—we even have pole dancing in the CCs. At one time, some of my grassroots leaders will say, "You want pole dancing? The moral..." I said, "No, it can be good." And if you do it openly, there'll be no monkey business. Right? So, we have things like that now. And I think it will keep on changing. The activities [will] go on.

So, the idea behind all these changes is to attract people. And why do we attract people? We want people to **mix**, to understand that there are other people with different life [*sic* lives], different pattern, different culture, different whatever.

The only trouble...you know, some of issues I had to grapple with is sometimes the PA staff and the grassroots forget, you know, what is [the] means and what is the end. So, sometimes they just focus on

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organising a slick event. For example, I critique even the way we run our National Day dinners. One I noticed, I attended several, and you'll find that...or every year I attend a few, and you go, and you see that it's first[ly], [the] same old aging crowd; secondly, the programme must have one Indian dance, Malay dance, one Chinese dance, you know—and [*sic* but] nobody explains what these dances are all about. The other issue is the community also follow[s] the government way. Everything outsourced. So, what do you do? You go and hire these getai singers from Malaysia to come and sing. You lose the purpose, you see.

So, like [for] the National Day function, you have many committees, Malay activities, Indian activities, they do cultural dancing. Why don't you involve your own people? Also, why don't you involve the schools? So, you know. So, some of them do it. I'm not against outsourcing. Sometimes you need a star, you know—a JJ Lin or somebody to come and then you'll get a bigger crowd—that's fine, but you must balance it out and have that community part. You see, and part of this also... it is good because there is interaction.

There was one good case I noticed. This was...what's her name...(sighs) early dementia...Anyway, they got school kids to dance, you know, Chinese kids to do Malay dance and you know. So, [it was] mixed; and what was very good too [was that] the emcee asked the kid "What did you learn in this process?" and he said, "I learned about my Malay friends." You know, the Chinese boy says that. Then the Malay girls, "Yeah, I now understand a little bit more about Indian dancing." So, at that age, you get people to see that yeah, there are differences and we should enjoy, [and] embrace those differences.

And there's another bugbear which maybe [is] not entirely related. You know, most Singaporeans after you leave school, you never sing [the] National Anthem anymore. You even forget the words. Right? So, one of the things I did in PA was during [the] National Day dinner, instead of the emcee saying, "Stand up for the National Anthem" or whatever, I

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said, "Emcee must say 'Ladies and gentlemen, let us sing the National Anthem.'" And everybody sings it.

I think it's important that we do things like that—and this is what PA is all about. The National Day dinner is like this. I mean, there are other things which I thought was not well done at that time. For example, you know in the old days, national service send-off ceremony was done...send-off was at the CC. Right? Because those days, early days, there were a lot of resistance to national service, but they continue to invite a table of national servicemen. They come in uniform. They sit on their own in the table. Nobody acknowledges them. They just eat by themselves and then they go off. That's not right! At least, you know, when you're on stage, you should acknowledge and say, "Ladies and gentlemen, these guys in uniform, they're there for that purpose..."

Also, I think what they have done in the old days, you invite the national servicemen from your area. So, you can say, you know, this young man lives here, these are the guys who will protect us in times of emergency. But out of convenience I suppose, MINDEF [started to] say, "Okay, this platoon, you go." Or "This section, you go." So, the meaning is lost.

I mean, this is an opportunity for many things, even for government policies, you know. It could be the occasion where instead of making all kinds of long policy speech[es], you could say, "Ladies and gentlemen, this year in my constituency, so many new babies were born!" and you encourage this sort of thing. Or you can say, "Oh, ladies and gentlemen, we have so many new citizens!" And one of the things we do in PA is when there are new citizens and we're able to do that, we get them to help organise some of these activities, including National Day. So, they feel [like they are] part of the community, and the community also sees them, you know, as people who are us, not who have come here and get all the benefits. Do you understand what I mean?

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So, these are things that...that's why there's difference between means and an end. What is the end? So, you want to organise something, think about what is the end you want. What do you want the people [who] experience it to go away with? Don't just give goodie bags, you know, to keep them [there] until the end of the event. I mean, there are a couple of constituencies which I visited where it's done very well. Don't need goodie bags, people come, people stay to the end. They sing and dance together as a community. Wonderful!

Raising Funds for the PA

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Okay, something you must know about PA is that the CAPEX [capital expenditure], the building, government policy after the million-dollar thing, has evolved to [being] 90% government CAPEX, 10% raised by the community, subject to a cap—I can't remember what the cap is. Anyone from PA maybe you can remember? You know what the cap is today? I don't know. But this is important. Because there's always that participation of 10%, and that is that ownership bit. In fact, the ownership sometimes gets to be a big problem because sometimes we have to close CCs because the population has shifted; but these fellows feel that they helped built the CC [and] they don't want to close the CC—even if it's sub-optimal, not economic, they want to keep the CC. But that sense of ownership [is there].

The other thing is that most of the...apart from the staff complement which PA provides, the operating costs of the CC are actually through fundraising, through revenues, through courses, events and so on, so forth. So, there's quite a lot of fundraising in the community.

I must give you an anecdote here. During the Youth Olympic days, Youth Olympic...the first Youth Olympics is [*sic* was] here, the YOG [Youth Olympic Games] people came to me and say, "We're short of money for the community run." For the torch run, torch relay. "Ah, why don't you ask..." at that time 84 constituencies, "Each one give me \$50,000. Then I have \$4.2 million to organise my run." So, I asked them, "Number one,

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do you know how hard it is for them to raise \$50,000?" "Number two," I said, "What do you give me in return? Do you allow my grassroots leaders to run?" and so on so forth. "Oh, this cannot, that cannot; this cannot, that cannot." Then I said, "If everything cannot... Raising money, you know. Raising money is very difficult. You go and raise money on your own." So, I told them no, no deal. So, in the end, no deal.

So, raising money in the community is **not easy**. I mean some are more fortunate than others. You've got benefactors, you've got some people who will give you—but in the old days, it was easier. In the old days, [it was] quite interesting. Another anecdote.

The treasurer of the CCMC is not the man who keeps accounts. The treasurer is the one who donates money. And he looks at you, and he says, "Wah chu ji'ban, le chu lua'chuei? [Hokkien for "I'll come out with ten thousand dollars, how much are you going to come up with?"]" He says, "I put down ten thousand. What are you going to offer?" So, everybody raises money there, that was the way, because businessmen can do that, in those days. Like, I think, Havelock CC, that area, all those Ellenborough market, you know, the Abalone Kings and all those people, they can say 50,000 whatever it is. But professionals, you say, 10,000, 20,000, "Eh, different. I'm a salaryman, you know? I'm not businessman." So, there's a big difference. So, raising money today, you know you've got a lot more salarymen than businessmen [now].

Research: The Birth of the PAssion Card

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Okay, now let me talk about PAssion card. You know, I told you I was assistant director, research then...but there was no research, you know, really statistics [only]. And when I arrived, there was one officer who was very proud because we had a room where we always bring [*sic* brought] the visitors to. The room had all kinds of...you know, it's like Lego, you know, you stick the name of the CC, what courses you have and so on. So, you know, it's all nice, very beautiful charts, but very static and in a

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way, meaningless, you know? So what if you've got a pretty thing to show visitors? That was my first problem there.

Then when I went back to PA as Chief, another thing happened. Now, at that time [the] Assistant Director (Research), now you have Director of Research. And what happened, the director research presented me with a statistical booklet, book, you know, books close 31st December—Year One, presented to me on Year Two, December [of] Year Two. So, 12 months after [the] books closed, you come up with this huge compilation. You open it up, there's no analysis, it's **just** statistics. So many people came here, there. And then [he] asked me to present it to the board and the Chairman of the board is the Prime Minister. I looked at it and say [*sic* said], "Number one, you're one year late. Number two, no analysis. How can you do that?" But apparently they've been doing that for years and they just accepted. So, I said, "No."

Then if you look down at the numbers, you know, they show I have 10,000 participants. So, I said, "Is that 10,000 unique individuals or 1,000 individuals coming 10 times, what does it mean? And what is the background of these people?" Don't know. "What is your real penetration?" Don't know. Now, just now I was talking about...even our grassroots leadership, you know at that time we have [*sic* had] roughly 30,000. I discovered that more than half of our residents' committee[s] did not have minority members! I say you're a residents' committee, you know? And you're supposed to engage the community. Of course, I know that in the...typically there's only about, you know, less than 10% of Malays or up to 15% of Malays maybe [in] each constituency, and maybe about 10% of Indians—roughly like that—but at least, one or two [are needed]. You have 30 members in a RC, but all [are] Chinese [and] I say, "Cannot be, you can't do this!"

Why? Because people don't look at numbers. And they...after a while, they say, "It is like that. You cannot get them because they're not interested." I said, "Have you made the effort?" Or even if you made the

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effort [and] you fail[ed] this year, you must continue making the effort, because that's what PA is about. It's cross-sectional representation as much as you can. Of course, you can't force it to say it must be 10 or 8% or exactly that way—you don't, but I say, "Minimum lah! At least one." And then later on, you can do more, or get more. You see? So, these are things which can be done.

So, I felt quite uncomfortable and many times they were quite...tell me I have ten thousand, a hundred thousand, whatever thousand representation, [and] I said, "Are you sure that...are they your residents or not?" Because sometimes, you know, people will bus their friend – I mean, it's okay, you can go to other places and do things, you know, it's fine – but you cannot do that all the time. And so, you have something like phantom, almost like phantom members—you can't do that.

Another anecdote. You see, Wong Kan Seng is like that; that's why I enjoyed working with him. He was at a block party, and [at] the block party, you're supposed to have...invite people, residents to come down to the block and interact. So, the chairman of the RC says, "Oh, see, I have so many residents here. All my residents." First thing Wong Kan Seng does is, he walked up to one resident, "[In Hokkien] Le kia toh lok?" "Where do you live?" Do you live here, or do you live somewhere else? So, this is good, that's what I like about Wong Kan Seng. You know, he takes after...I read this in one of Jack Welches' books: people respect what you inspect. [If] you don't inspect like this, people pull wool over your eyes.

But also, as a leader, you must be very consistent. I tell you how consistent he was. When we're briefing the ground to build our new headquarters in the Victoria Institution, I said we have the grassroots leader, we have the deputy chairman all that, to help break ground. I said why don't you get a child of our staff to stand next to the...because it's future, for the future, you know, we're building for the future. So, I told Mr Wong, I said, "These are children of our staff." So, he turned to

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a little boy, he says, “Who is your father? Point him out for me.” So, he was checking up on me. But I knew, that’s why I gave him the facts. I gave him the real thing. But this is...I’m saying those of you who will become bosses in future, you must remember this consistently, people respect what you inspect. If you don’t inspect, bo chap [colloquial for “do not care”], discipline all goes. Alright?

Now, analytics. Why did I go into it then? There’s another reason. [At that time], each CC and all that maintain[ed] its own membership card, everything [was] done manually, so it [was] never updated, you know. So, I said, “Can’t we do something else?” Part of my inspiration was also what some of the retailers do, and like what Walmart does. Walmart’s margins are very low, but they have real time data on their transactions. At the same time, you have stock control. If you’re in the manufacturing or retail business, you know stock control is the key. Because if you’re overstocked, you’re holding a lot of goods, a lot of money, [but you’re] not getting returns. If you’re understocked, you run out of stock, your customers are not happy. So, stock control is important.

So, that actually stimulated me to say, “Why can’t we have a national card?” And one of my colleagues came up with the PAssion—you know, PA—PAssion card. And it’s a good idea, because technically if you use this carefully and you scan it, or you just swipe it, there’s a record and you can track participation and where the person comes from. I mean, of course you can say all this data can be misused. Of course, data can be misused as we’re all now finding out about Facebook and so on, but [if] you use it properly, I think it creates very valuable insights. Also, if you do it properly, you know, some of the staff or the grassroots leader may say, “I cannot achieve this, I cannot achieve that.” But there’re many different outlets, right? Once you bring it up, you show which are the outlets that are surpassing everybody else, and which are the ones that are very weak; then you [can] take a look and learn from one another. So, that is what it’s all about.

00:43:38

So, I moved into this and then, in a way, I'm very passionate about analytics because of this. I mean, sometimes, the problem with analytics is we have silo. Sometimes even within the same agency, within your department, you have data silos. I think we have to overcome this. Now, with your liveable cities and smart cities, smart nation, you're going to have millions and millions of centres, terabytes and terabytes of data. Yes, they're good for...to tell you what's happening now, but if you can bring all that together, you go into predictive; you go into insights; you go into trends; you go into changes—and it can be anywhere [in] many, many different forms. For example, even the trains, maintenance of trains. I mean, your training manual, engineering manual tell[s] you [that] you must repair or maintain at this hour, but you have a lot of this data, you have a lot of sensor[s] going around, maybe you need to challenge what the manufacturer tells you about maintenance. And you don't want to over-maintain, neither do you want to under-maintain. So, again if you collect all this data and analyse all this data, it will be able to help you.

And then for agencies for example that are giving lots of money. For example, who was it the other day? Lost \$40 million. Skills Future, was it? They lost \$40 million because if you have simple analytics in place, you will know that certain patterns cannot be [right], you know. Something's wrong there, and I'm quite sure that income tax and all these, they will benefit from this kind of stuff. So, a lot of government agents...

And I feel quite...I think [it's] not unjustified, you know, that the kind of political pushback that happened after 2011, because we all dropped the ball. ICA [Immigration and Checkpoints Authority] dropped the ball, you know, nobody was looking at immigration numbers properly. HDB, and I don't know who else, you have a backlog of housing; then of course, the public transport, you have too many migrant workers and competing for limited space. Nobody was watching the numbers. So, now, [we] better watch the numbers.

00:46:12

Earlier on, during my time, we talked about [a] knowledge-based economy. Today, I'm telling you, we're [an] analytics economy. Some of these things, I want to say, you [have to] be careful—because my time is running out—watch changing demographics and circumstances. What you did in the past may not work now and in the future. I think agencies and public officers, you need to work closer together—and there are [*sic* is] not only community engagement between the government and people, but even among agencies, and sometimes within agencies too.

And also, you probably, I would advocate that the agencies go out, engage with PA, go and meet the people, and don't forget, you know, there are always emerging generations of people. Younger people plus new migrants, who don't understand some of the basic tenets: why Singapore does what it does; why do we have co-paid health insurance; why do we have ERP [electronic road pricing] and COE [certificate of entitlement], instead of complaining about it all the time; why do we do things the way we do it? I think these are things that agencies...not when there's a crisis, before there's a crisis, [should] go engage the grassroots, go engage the people well in advance. So, when there's a crisis, you know, you [would] already have made the connection [and] the crisis resolution will be a lot easier for you.

Okay, so I hope you have better inter-agency understanding. But you know, there's this slogan "Whole of government". Don't get thrown away by it, that doesn't mean all government agencies have to work **all** together. I think so long as...I mean you should work together only if it makes sense. For example, you know, just from my Home Team experience, you don't need all the agencies to work together to go on a raid—only if it makes sense! Maybe CNB should work with police on this particular event. SCDF work with it on a particular project. So, you know, "whole of government" doesn't mean "whole". You wait for "whole", it is "hole" without the "w". Hole, big hole!

00:48:27

Okay! So parting shot. About analytics. It's out there, computing power, everything is better now, much easier. Go harness it. But one important thing about this, you know [is] don't leave this to your IT people. You, the managers, the users, you must understand what [it's about]. Go find out a little bit more about analytics and find out how. If you know what is happening, if only you can know what is happening, you will do your job a heck of a lot better.

Okay, I've run out of time. Thank you. (Applause)

Panel and Q&A Segment

Louisa-May Khoo
00:49:01

So, thank you very much, everyone, for coming this afternoon. I'm sure Mr Tan has clarified...lifted the veil of mystery that surrounds PA. I mean, for me, my only interface with PA is when I use my PAssion card at Cold Storage. (Laughs) And of course, the CCs, I think that's the common face for many of us as PA. So, I'm glad to hear about the social mobilisation and all the grassroots organisations that actually form the foundation of PA.

So, maybe we can take two or three questions at a go, and then I'll invite Mr Tan to respond. So, can we have the first question please?

AUD1
00:49:43

Hi. My name is Martha, a visiting researcher at CLC, and I was interested in what you said, Mr Tan, about how you have noticed that **in the community centres some of the leadership was not very diverse, so it's all Chinese, there weren't many minority populations that were engaged in leadership.** I was wondering if you could **elaborate at all on various strategies to incorporate different people, or get different people to want to participate, and how do we go about bringing diversity [in] and making sure it's just not all one type of person that's taking part in the CCs?**

Louisa-May Khoo
00:50:24

Thank you very much, Martha. Okay, maybe we'll take one more question and then I'll let... Can I have another question please? Anyone?

AUD2
00:50:38

Hi, I'm Weiliang from HDB. I'm asking about the analytics part. I mean you talked about PAssion card, you talked about how data shouldn't be in silos in PA, and how would...do you have any examples of like how PA has been sharing such information with other agencies and what kind of procedure would it be like in terms of sharing such information with other agencies? Thank you.

Tan Boon Huat
00:51:05

I do it in a very Singaporean way. You know, I don't fully like using this tool, but we do have an annual awards system. So, you get points if you organise this, you organise that, you get this. So, one of the important point area[s] is the diversity part. Make sure you have that diversity. So, for example, if you have good ethnic diversity in your grassroots leadership, you get extra brownie points. If you don't, you don't get a brownie point. But that is again means to an end. I think what's more important is that you explain to the leaders why it is important to have that diversity. I think once they understand it, they don't just play and manipulate—because it's easy, you can appoint somebody who is a sleeping member of a particular race and say, "I've got a member." But [the] important thing is to get that message through. Why do you need this? That in the end, you want to have the diversity, that representation, the feedback channels and so on. And once this gets through, I think I would say most of the grassroots leaders are very responsible people, and they go all out and they do this. So, this is something.

One of the things I instituted, and I think it probably carries on, is every six months, I have a rotating dinner with different CCC and CCMC Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen. And this is where I use this as a tool for me to share some of the results that we have—I mean, if I'm concerned that there's too much of this or too little of that—or also to discuss what else we need to do. I mean, I remember one stage, this was before it was a crisis, because as a result of one of PM Lee Hsien Loong's National Day Rally speeches, I went back and I said, "Look, because we have so many foreigners coming in, we should form a group among the

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grassroots called ‘The Integration and Naturalisation Champions’ [INCs]”, so that they should actually look into ways—I won’t prescribe it—look into ways of engaging the new immigrants into the community activities. I mean we may not be able to get them all, but you’ll get **some**. And some, if you get the right ones, they’re like your influencers, to pass on the message to their own brethren. Okay, I hope that addresses your question.

I think the other question is whether PA shares—I don’t think PA really shares this at this time. I mean they do it within themselves for their own purpose[s], and I think for them also it is probably not as well-developed as I would have liked. Unfortunately, my runway was very short, when I hit that particular age, I had to retire. So I wish I had three more years. If I had three more years, I think I would have institutionalised a few more things with analytics.

Louisa-May Khoo
00:54:27

So, maybe I’ll just tag on to that question. **So now that you have this analytics going, especially with PAssion card, has it sort of improved your outreach for instance?** Because you kind of now know what is the kind of profile that maybe uses the activities at the CCs. So, where there are gaps, how have you sort of tried to...?

Tan Boon Huat
00:54:50

For this, I cannot give you an empirical answer, I can give you a theoretical one because I’ve been out of PA for almost eight years now. But I would say this, that the tools are there; I mean, one thing I asked the other day, when I left PA, we have something like just below [a] 50% household penetration of PAssion card. In other words, half the households in Singapore, about a million households, have the PAssion card. So, recently I met the new Chief Executive, I asked him this question, and I think he said it was well...you know, beyond [a] 75, 80% penetration rate.

So, the PAssion card is there, and the potential for him to use the information is there. So, this is where if they do it well, they do it consistently, they’ll be able to know. And when you know, then you will know what you need to do—especially if you can know in comparison to

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somebody else. If somebody else has achieved a much higher rate of engagement, then you ask yourself why not yourself? Also, sometimes you may find that you are...the bulk of your programmes are reaching a particular segment [of the population]. For example, mostly senior citizens and whatever, and maybe young children. But not the working youth for example. Then this prompts the question now that we know that we're not engaging enough, what we want to do? So, you can't prescribe what should be done, but at least it raises a question and [it is] then incumbent on the grassroots leaders, the PA staff to work out how they can then try to improve on the engagement of particular groups.

AUD3

00:56:50

You're mentioning about if you had been given three more years, or actually a few more years, you would have institutionalised some more. **Can you share with us some of those that, you know, it'll allow us to understand how your thought is and what PA is developing?** It will help us find out, understand the PA picture.

Tan Boon Huat

00:57:11

I think if I had the chance, I would have got it to the point where the grassroots, the staff, the grassroots and everyone has an opportunity periodically to look at the analysis of the data, of the participation data that comes out. So, you know for example, are you reaching your minorities? In terms of age...let's say your own constituency age profile is a certain level, are you getting roughly a representative profile correspondingly to what you have? Or have you got it upside down? Is it good or bad? I don't know. I mean if it's good or bad, it depends also, you know, sometimes. Are the people who take part in your programmes and activities residents in the area?

And from a PA HQ [headquarters] level, it doesn't matter. So long as you're engaged with the PA, any outlet I don't mind, but if you are the local RC Chairman, and most of the people who take part in your activities come from not within your zone, then the question arises: Why aren't you engaging the residents in your zone? And there could be good reasons. Maybe not...but then if you look at it, at least it prompts the question like how do you want to...do you want to improve? And if you

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want to improve, probably if there is a system, the system works well, you can look and see, “Hey, this particular RC somewhere else is doing so well. Let me go to him and learn his tricks. How did he do it?”

So, this is what I would have liked to do. It becomes part of the system that here you have...it’s like you have meters and gauges. You see something, you know, in the red or green zone, if it’s the red zone, then you better ask yourself, how do you get back to the green?

So, if I had the time, I think I would have like to institutionalise this and make this thing—the data, the analysis of the data available down to the operating...the people on the ground, the grassroots leaders and the staff, in a very systematic way.

AUD4
00:59:23

Yeah, hi. I’m Najib from Sports Singapore. So, Sports Singapore was previously called Sports Council, so in recent years, we also have moved into the nation-building perspective through sport. **With regards to your parting shot on better inter-agency understanding, do you think it’s good that PA and Sports Singapore are complementing each other, or it’s like counter-productive because it’s overlapping and there doesn’t seem to be a distinct line in between?** I mean, it’s all benefit for local community but just want to have your opinion on it.

Tan Boon Huat
00:59:56

Well, I don’t know what the situation is today, but during my time, I thought we could and should have worked more closely together. I’ll give you an example. Whenever there was SEA [Southeast Asian] Games or ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian] Games, Sports Council will come to me and say, “Why don’t you get the grassroots to write letters of encouragement to our sportsmen?” So, I said, “Yeah, we could do that, but we don’t know who your sportsmen are! Which constituency do they live [in]? Which CC nearest do they live to? Then I can give the name to the CCMC Chairman, he can invite the athlete to come down at some of our events, you know, and show the face.” Then when you write a letter of support, or encouragement, it comes with a certain feeling. Otherwise, you’re just writing for the sake of writing, you see? So, this I felt there was a disjoint.

01:00:52

Of course, maybe the problem was...could also be with the NSAs [National Sports Associations], whether they...you cannot say that...I mean the NSAs will tell, they're too busy training. But once in a while, you can come in. And even if...frankly speaking, if you're professional sports[man], you have to do, you know, some PR [public relations], you do it. Right? So, I think there was this kind of disjoint there.

The other thing is slightly different. I think maybe when we first inherited the constituency sports club [CSC] from Sports Council, again I think there's a bit of a disjoint because they were more concerned about competition. In fact, they're sometimes quite absurd. [As] part of the competition rule, you must be a resident to compete in inter-constituency games. So, some people change[d] their address, you know, it's the same, almost like the primary school registration—[to] change their address in order to represent the particular...they buy over that sportsman, you know.

So, I wanted to change that, and try to go for a more inclusive approach, which actually I learned from the Americans. There's an American Association—not American School, not American Club—and I got to know the president very well. What they try to do is get, you know, in a sports team, the kids of all different abilities. So, you don't only focus on the good players. Everybody gets a chance to play, and part of that is that team building, and also the realisation that the good players must help the not-so-good players as well.

So, that [is] little bit of a disjoint. So, there's a little bit of disjoint that way. But this part working with Sports SG, I'm not so sure, you know, whether in this case it was Sports SG or whether it's the NSAs that... I still think, and don't forget, at that time there was a lot of unhappiness too about foreign talent. Foreign...your table tennis people. I mean they are always there, they are on top, but they don't come down to the ground, they don't engage with anyone. We don't know where they live. They don't come down. So, they don't belong, we don't belong, so why

01:03:11

do we support? You know. Some of these things you've got to understand.

But one important thing about agencies when you want to work together, the important thing is to couch what you want done in common objectives. For example, Sports Council said "You come, you write letters to my sportsman." So, I said, "For what? Does nothing for me. Your athlete doesn't rally my people together." You know, what for?

Similarly, [there is] another experience I had when I was also sitting on the Arts Council. There was an Indian dance teacher, you know. I mean, she's very passionate about Indian dance. She said, "Mr Tan, your CC should house us, should take us in. You know, subsidise us." I said, "Why should I? Your job, you want to promote Indian dance, which is fine. But if you said to me, 'Mr Tan, can you help us [and] house us; in return, I will make an effort at taking part in your community activities, and I will also make the effort to explain to the other communities what Indian culture is all about' and [with] this mutual understanding thing, I would be more receptive. But you say, 'I want [you] to do it because you owe it to me. Arts and culture is very important to Singapore, you owe it to me.' I'd say, 'No, it doesn't work like that.'"

So, if you want to work with agencies, with another agency [you] must say, "Look, what is our common interest in it? We should work together." Right? And then I think you'll get a lot more traction that way.

AUD2
01:04:58

Can you share with us the spread of the CC and how does it sort of been selected throughout the whole island? Is it because of demographic[s] then you build bigger CCs? Because some of the CCs facilities are much better than the rest. Location-wise and it...because I'm looking at...I sit on...I used to sit on the board of SAFRA, which is also a public service association, but that one is concentrated very much on the NS men, but we have families, extended, a lot of facilities like swimming pools. How do you see the CC[s] under the PA evolving, going forward? How do you see the overall landscape?

Tan Boon Huat
01:05:44

You shouldn't be asking me that, you should be asking whether...ask the [unclear], but I would say that...today there are different CCs of different size and so on, so forth. Partly historical, because the CCs [were] built and evolve[d] over a period of time. You don't build one today and just because we have a new model, we demolish and then all of us have the same uniform model. So, it's a time...it's a constant evolution.

In some instances, as I said, population moves out, then that's the opportunity, you close down, and new location. I wanted to say something tongue-in-cheek to HDB people here. In my time, in the early days, we always felt that HDB gave us the lousiest piece of land. (Audience laughter) Most uneven, and you know, a lot of slopes, which they didn't want for their HDB building. Now, but that is I think partly true. (Audience laughter) and location and so on, so forth.

But I think it's changing. I think they're trying out different models. For example, Tampines Hub is a totally...that was started around the time as I was about to leave. So, the thought started, whether you want to have... Sometimes some people use the term like mega-CCs—I don't like that kind of term. But idea, you know, do you work like Tampines Hub within...co-located with Sports SG and so on, which is an interesting thing. Like there are people from URA here—I've often asked, why is there...why must every school have a sports field? Why must you Sports Council...I mean you have you own sports facilities, and universities, you have your own and so on, so forth? I'll tell you why.

I visited—I can't remember exactly the name of the city in Japan—there's a municipal building, and [it has] all kinds of sports facilities: swimming pool, multi-purpose hall, and so on. The interesting thing was because [of] land scarcity in Japan around the Tokyo area, in the morning, the schools use[d] the facility. So, [they] use the swimming pool, there's an indoor running track, the gyms and so on. In the afternoon, the retirees use the place. In the evening, some working people, who are not out karaoke-ing and drinking, use the place. So, in

01:08:21

a way, it is integrated, and I would say the utilisation...I mean it's making full use of scarce resources.

I'm not quite sure why we never quite went that way here. You know, everybody wants to have their own swimming pool, their own sports field and so on. I'm not quite sure whether we've come together to take a look at this. So, things like this need a relook. Quite apart from the site.

Louisa-May Khoo
01:08:55

Any URA officers who want to respond to that? Who dares to respond to that?

Tan Boon Huat
01:08:59

It's a question. I really don't know why we haven't quite done that.

See, I'm one of the critics [sic criticisms] I had about Sports Council then, you know. You see, for me in the PA, in a way, my KPI [Kep Performance Indicators] to my staff and also, unfortunately I got put KPI to the grassroots too was utilisation, whereas I was told then, rightly or wrongly, that [it was] the sports facilities, cleanliness and safety. So, utilisation is not the issue, you know? So, if it's not used, maybe sometimes the staff feel, not used even better, then [it] doesn't get dirty and then [there are] no safety issue[s]. So, I think some of these things, you need to relook.

I'm sure things have changed, you know, since then.

Louisa-May Khoo
01:09:52

May I ask you a difficult question?

Tan Boon Huat
01:09:54

Yes.

Louisa-May Khoo
01:09:56

You know, you were saying earlier on, the PA Act, the Chairman is actually the PM? And the Deputy Chairman is one of...a minister. So, how would you respond...this, I think this question comes up quite often in the press and in Parliament, **how would you respond to people who say that the PA is basically a political partisan outfit?**

Tan Boon Huat
01:10:22

Good one. People say the difference between PA and PAP is one P. (Audience laughter) Well, I think we should all be...because just now I mentioned you've got to be careful with your choice of words, right, about "melting pot" and so on. Political and partisan are two different things. Everything that any government agency does has got political implications. HDB, [if] you don't get your job done properly, you don't get your housing supply [done] properly, [it's a] big political problem.

Question is, is it partisan? Let me put [it] to you this way. No politician has ever come up to me and say, "I want you to do this to fix the other, the opposition fellow." That one I can sumpah [from the Malay verb "to swear"] it never happened to me. Secondly, all our activities are opened to everyone, including our foreign friends! You can come down to our CCs, take a yoga class, whatever—not a problem. And when you come, I don't ask you "Are you a party member of this party, that party? Not that party, I kick you out." The same thing happens with my grassroots leaders. I don't ask them which party they belong to. But if any of them, any party, if they are...during the CC activities and or RC activities, are waving the party flag, then I would tell him, "Cease and desist. If you don't, I kick you out." But apart from that, nothing happen[s].

During election time for example, we are very careful. We disallow any party-political activity in the RC centre or in government premises—just like [how] you would do the same in all your government agencies, you don't allow party-political. But I cannot stop grassroots leaders from joining political parties. That's your right as a citizen of Singapore to join any political party. My staff? I mean, the staff also, you can join any party that you want. I'm sure that there are among the PA staff and among the grassroots, there are those who vote one way and the other. It doesn't bother me. So, we don't bother about that at all.

So, it's not. So, our services is all...we're very open. Everyone, every Singaporean is the same. Even our visitors, even our foreign workers,

01:12:56

they're welcome to use our facilities. Not a problem. So, it's always there.

Of course, I think the key point is this. The appointment of the advisors. To this, I would ask the question, you know, it's up to the government to decide to appoint whoever they want to appoint. Maybe we don't...if we had a coalition government, it would be different. Then I think in a coalition party, they would ask to be represented. But in our case, no, we're not in a coalition situation. So, that doesn't happen.

AUD3

01:13:42

I'd like to ask Mr Tan to share with us how things might go forward? Because I come from...the first question the lady was asking, whether PA and community centre[s] can be a point of integration for different races, as well as for foreigners who want to be [a] part of Singapore. I think you mentioned that it could be...[we] could do more. Right? I mean...one thing which...I **engage with a lot of expatriate[s] and if they are here working under an employment pass, if they bring their partners and they're not having employment pass, they're having what we call a dependent pass, and there's a lot of difference—I'm just sharing that it is hell of a lot of difference.** And how does this sort of... I won't call them citizens, I would say **part of the community in Singapore can utilise the People Association as well as the community centre to integrate a little bit their family?**

Tan Boon Huat

01:14:46

Now of course, they are welcome to use our...they are welcome to come and take part in our activities. I mean, if they are paying activities, they pay like everybody else. I think PA, we don't have a PR rate, citizen rate and... I mean in some places, we do make it a point to actively engage them, because I remember up north, near one of the...I think Woodlands or Admiralty. One of these places where there's a concentration of foreign workers from the subcontinent. They love cricket, so we engaged them, we brought them in, and we played cricket, we allowed them to play cricket and we joined them to play cricket. So, they feel, you know, in a sense welcomed as well, you see?

01:15:34

And on my own part, where I can, I've worked with foreign embassies, I've worked with like the American Association for example. Sometimes we have joint projects and so on. The Japanese Association interestingly enough have this Red-and-White competition with one of our CCs, one or two of our CCs, I can't remember. Every year it goes on. So, some of these things are there all the time. So, we don't really discriminate. It's just whether what we have on offer meets their requirements. Because ours sometimes can be basic, although we do have some higher-end offerings as well.

Louisa-May Khoo
01:16:22

Alright, if you could join me perhaps to give Mr Tan a big warm round of applause (audience applause) for sharing his insights with us this afternoon.

[Transcript ends at 01:16:30]

LECTURE INFORMATION

SUBJECT

Bringing Different Communities Together: The People's Association Story

SPEAKER

Mr Tan Boon Huat

Former Chief Executive Director, People's Association

MODERATOR

Ms Louisa-May Khoo

Senior Assistant Director, Centre for Liveable Cities

DATE

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CLC Seminar Room, URA Building Level 8

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1 Hour 16 Minutes 39 Seconds

Note:

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[] are used for insertions, after the interview. The information is not necessarily contained in the original tape.

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