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By Invitation

7 'PC' ways to make people-centric policies



David Chan

For The Straits Times

If asked to describe 2015 for Singapore, I would summarise it as "a people-centric year".

For just about everyone – politicians, civil servants, community leaders, academics, journalists, social activists or the public itself – the attention was centred on issues that matter to the people.

It may seem obvious that being people-centric should characterise how Singapore goes about things. But when people-centricity is driven by populist concerns or political correctness, the outcomes can be self-defeating at best and disastrous at worst.

It is important that individuals, communities and the Government, who adopt the ideal of being people-centric, know what it takes to be truly so.

But first, a recap of the major happenings this year, where people were the centre of focus.

A year for everyone

The year started with Singapore's Golden Jubilee independence celebrations setting the climate. Throughout the year, the SG50 celebrations and activities influenced people's thoughts, emotions and behaviours. The celebrations wrap up this month with the "Future of Us" exhibition that provides insights to how we may live, work, play and learn in the future.

Unveiled in February, Budget 2015 highlighted the future of technology, investment in skills and the uplifting of small and medium-sized enterprises. No longer couched in exclusively economic terms, these issues were debated in March with a clear focus on people's needs, concerns and aspirations.

Then came the news of founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's death on March 23. For seven days, Singaporeans experienced a collective grief, accompanied by a deep sense of gratitude to a great man who built Singapore, or what I termed in an earlier commentary "nationally shared emotions".

The departure of Mr Lee also made Singaporeans appreciate that this highly liveable place that they call home did not come about naturally. The widespread and genuine public response contributed to a national unity. It created a bond among the people.

The prolonged period of haze caused by Indonesian forest fires, which started in August, led to much inconvenience. But there was no negative spiral of public complaints. Instead, civil society

groups came up with new initiatives to fight the haze. Consumer pressures and retailer actions led to removal of products from companies that had or might have contributed to the forest fires.

People responded to the haze with adaptability, resilience and proactivity.

During the General Election in September, political parties expressed their people-centric goals using different approaches, and with varying success.

Post-election, various explanations were propagated to make sense of the large swing of votes towards the ruling party. Widespread and deep engagement with the people, people-centric policies and voter psychology all seem to have played significant roles in the election results.

There were also several major unfortunate events this year.

One example was Singapore's worst train disruption on July 7, which directly affected more than 400,000 commuters. Another was the outbreak of hepatitis C infections at the Singapore General Hospital, which apparently started in April and were made known to the public in October.

These headline events raised important issues that must be addressed urgently and objectively to prevent similar occurrences in the future.

Perhaps the most important people-centric focus this year was that, throughout the year, sensibilities, empathy and compassion guided the design and implementation of various schemes

affecting different segments of the population. Examples include the SkillsFuture Credit scheme for training, the waiver of examination fees and top-ups for education accounts, the Fresh Start Housing scheme to help rental flat dwellers own homes, the Pioneer Generation Package that provides healthcare benefits to Singapore pioneers for life, the Silver Support scheme to help lower-income elderly and the Central Provident Fund enhancements for retirement adequacy.

Some see these schemes – which clearly made a positive difference in people's lives – as a seismic shift in social policies, while others call them incremental changes. But the underlying people-centric principles are clear: recognise our pioneers, promote active ageing, strengthen social security, and build a fair and inclusive society.

To me, there is a strong theme that runs through all the above attitudes and behaviours this year. This is the recognition that how people think, feel and act should matter in both the outcome and the process of what we do.

Seven PC priorities

What can policymakers learn from this people-centric year?

I hope what occurred this year will not produce attitudes and actions that put people at the centre simply because of two common "PCs" – populist concerns and political correctness. These will only lead to unrealistic public demands and unsustainable

policies. These consequences produce short-term gain but create long-term pain.

To be truly people-centric, I suggest moving away from the two common PCs to focus on seven other PCs instead.

PUBLIC CONCERNS

Do not confuse the proper focus on public concerns with populism. Populism is about politically expedient policies that pander to prevailing public sentiments without regard to policy quality and sustainability.

Addressing public concerns is what policymakers are expected to do. Understand public concerns not just by asking how people feel about an issue. People are both rational and emotional, and so are their concerns. Appreciate the practical contexts that people are living in to find out what matters most or more to them, and why.

POLITICAL CONTEXT

Recognise that more public engagement means more people will speak up and take action. People will be more interested and involved in political issues. Opinions will be more varied and volatile. The sensible response is to develop a positive political diversity that enhances innovation, addresses issues, maintains social cohesion and contributes to people's well-being.

This requires moving from a society where the role of government is dominant in many areas to one where individuals and communities step up to co-create

whole-of-society solutions.

POLICY CONTENT

Develop the content of a policy holistically rather than in an issue-specific manner. Ensure policies are supported by all agencies so that they cohere. This improves desired policy outcomes and avoids unintended consequences.

Two recent developments were important steps in this direction. One was the formation of the strategy group unit, led by the head of the civil service, to examine issues that cut across multiple public agencies. The other was the appointment of three Coordinating Ministers to integrate policies on national security, economic and social issues, and infrastructure, that cut across different ministries.

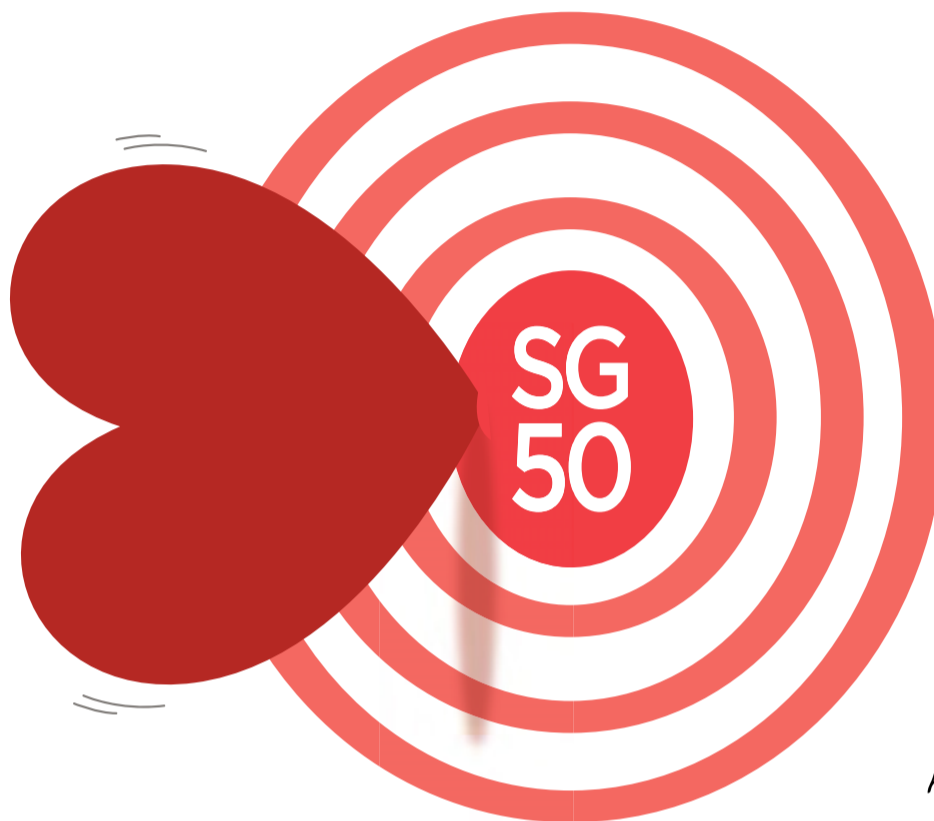
POLICY COMMUNICATION

Be more strategic when communicating policies to the people. This goes beyond technical clarity in messaging. It involves making sure policy announcements and public discussions are well integrated, so that people understand the policy intent and not just the policy content.

When people believe that the intention of policy and government action is to serve their interests and is motivated by genuine concern for citizen well-being, public trust in the Government's benevolence increases.

PROBLEM-SOLVING COMPETENCE

Uphold people's confidence in the Government's ability to



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perform and solve problems. Address issues that directly affect people's quality of life. Manage critical incidents effectively.

Major failures in efficient delivery of public services and management of health crises should be treated according to the principles of objectivity, accountability, fairness and transparency.

If the public perceives that such failures are not taken seriously, trust in the Government's competence will erode quickly, making it difficult to restore. It is about competence rather than credentials.

PERSONAL CHARACTER

Earn people's trust in integrity. People need to know that political leaders and public service officers are not corrupt and are impartial. Reinforce the position of zero tolerance for wrongdoings by addressing allegations of wrongdoing and impropriety promptly and properly. Take vigorous action against those caught for corruption, regardless of who they are. Character matters more than charisma.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CAPITAL

Create opportunities for people to acquire a sense of self-efficacy that they can solve problems. When people see that things can and will get better in the future, they experience optimism. People have hope when they see real opportunities for them to achieve their aspirations.

Resilience develops when people recover from adversity and adapt to changes. Building this psychological capital – self-efficacy, optimism, hope and resilience – will produce a strong society of individuals and communities. This is a society able to pursue positive things but also able to handle shocks, failures and unmet expectations.

Our next chapter

As the year closes and the SG50 celebration ends, Singapore can look to 2016 as the beginning of a new chapter for the nation.

The chapter content is neither predetermined nor random. How it turns out will be affected by many economic and social forces that come our way. But much will also depend on how we choose to contribute to it.

Will people be genuinely motivated to contribute? Not if policy actions are based on populist concerns and political correctness.

But if policymakers are truly people-centric and focus on the seven PC priorities, people will understand what is at stake and figure out what matters. Their motivation to contribute to the next chapter of Singapore will be sustained and sustainable.

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