

Singapore Management University

Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

Digital Narratives of Asia

Institute for Societal Leadership (2016-2018)

24-3-2015

Herman Hochstadt [Singapore, Permanent Secretary in Civil Service]

Herman Hochstadt

Follow this and additional works at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/isl_dna



Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#), and the [Leadership Studies Commons](#)

Citation

Hochstadt, Herman. Herman Hochstadt [Singapore, Permanent Secretary in Civil Service]. (2015). 1-14.
Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/isl_dna/19

This Transcript is brought to you for free and open access by the Institute for Societal Leadership (2016-2018) at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Digital Narratives of Asia by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email cheryl@smu.edu.sg.

Interviewee: **HERMAN HOCHSTADT**
Interviewer: Kirpal Singh
Date: 24 March 2015
Location: Singapore

0:00:20

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Your name, Sir, is synonymous with the Singapore Civil Service. Not only were you one the first to join the ranks of our new Administrative Service, you rose, from sort of the lower rungs right to the very top. How was it like? Those early days, when we were forming a new civil service? I assumed that you were slowly trying to wean away from the British Civil Service. Is that right?

0:00:43

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

Yes, it wasn't the only form, sir. It was a very old service, but before that under the colonial rule, it was quite a different situation. When I came in, it was the first time they had internal self-government, with the PAP (People's Action Party), fully elected government and all. Of course, they did control defence; they did control foreign affairs, but internal self-government... So, the situation was different, but you had to really work for the people rather than being told what to do by the colonial authorities. So that was I think more a question of approach rather than anything else. When I came into the Civil Service, my first posting was to the Ministry of Finance. The Minister then was Dr Goh Keng Swee. There was a lot of, sort of jobs to be done because the new system was coming in, the old system was out and the new system, self-governing, and so there was a lot of work to be done, especially new work initiate... to initiate new work. My boss pushed most of the stuff that he had been asked by Dr Goh to do, he passed it on to me.

0:01:45

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Passed it onto you, right...

0:01:46

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

He must have put his work up to Dr Goh, but to be fair to him, he didn't claim it as his own work; and must have said that it was my work. So, at some point of time, Dr Goh, called me up one day after I was with the Service, for about... almost three years, two years plus, he called me to his office one day, and I was a very young junior officer, had only maybe one or two occasions before that ever gone to his office for anything. He called me to his office, and he told me; he said, "You're posted to the Prime Minister's Office as a secretary." I said, "When?" He said, "Now." I said, "What do you mean, now?" He said, "Yeah, you go over." So, it

was... and then I went into Prime Minister's Office as a secretary. That position today is called the PPS, the Principal Private Secretary. But in those days, it was called Secretary to the PM (Prime Minister).

0:02:33

[Kirpal Singh](#)

So, in a sense your career, quite often coincided with Dr Goh, right? Because in the Defence Ministry, you were there too, isn't it?

0:02:41

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

Yes, in fact the... the Finance I started off with, then it was Prime Minister's Office. When I was at Prime Minister's office, separation from Malaysia took place and actually when I was in the Prime Minister's Office, we went into Malaysia and we were in Malaysia, came out of Malaysia. Then when I came out from Malaysia, I was swiftly posted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and I was the... my job was to organise and be the secretary to the delegation. The delegation led by Dr Toh Chin Chye and the Foreign Minister, Mr Rajaratnam, to go to the UN (United Nations) to get admission of Singapore to the UN as a member. And then with the delegation going on a goodwill mission to a number of African states, Tanzania, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi, a whole lot of states, and then Tunisia, Algeria, and even to Moscow, USSR, then Yugoslavia, Burma - then called Burma, Cambodia, Thailand then Singapore back again. So, I was posted on that one. I went on the delegation with... we were living for about almost two and a half months out of a suitcase.

0:03:51

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Easily, yes.

0:03:52

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

Just travelling from place to place, and (back in) those days travel was not very easy, especially Africa. Then when I got back to Singapore at the end of the thing, the day I landed at the airport, there was a welcome committee there, and the delegation, Dr Toh Chin Chye and Mr Rajaratnam were giving speeches. While that was happening, I went to the VIP (Very Important Person) room in the airport to sort of get a bit of rest and I met Dr Goh and he laughed and said, "You know you're coming back to my ministry?" And I said, "What do you mean?" I got back somewhere over the weekend. He said, "Monday, you're reporting to the Ministry of Interior and Defence. You're coming here." So that was it. Then so I worked with him there at Defence, and then later, I was back again in Ministry of Finance after some time, and then later again in MAS (Monetary Authority of Singapore).

0:04:45

[Kirpal Singh](#)

What was it like working with Dr Goh at such close range?

0:04:50

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

He's a...I think one thing about him is that he is a man of ideas, and always on the go, always wants to get some things done and started. A lot of new ideas, very creative, but very impatient. I got on fairly well with him, but of course we had our ups and downs, and things like that. Well, I can't say ups and downs because he was always up, and I was always down. [Both laugh]

0:05:12

[Kirpal Singh](#)

How was it like in terms of climbing the ranks? Like what were your bosses looking for? Was it diligence, was it imaginative creativity? What was it?

0:05:22

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

It depends on who you were working for, and what you were working on. There was some... some like the PM, Lee Kuan Yew, for instance, when I worked with him that time, that was some of the most difficult times. He was very suspicious of everybody, no matter who you are. So, you don't get the full story from him, you know you got to try and figure out... I remember one day, I did something and then when he found out about it he came back and said, not that I did, I didn't do something and he came back and said, "Why didn't you do this?" I said, "You didn't tell me." He said, "How long have you been working for me? I said, "About six months now." He said, "Six months, and you can't read my mind?" So, this is the sort. Some... that's their way of working and others got different ways of working.

0:06:11

[Kirpal Singh](#)

So, some people said he had a bad temper, is that right?

0:06:13

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

I would, yes. I'd say, he's got a quick temper, I wouldn't say bad temper. Quick temper. But I think you have to realise that the pressures that he was under, and especially during that time when I was there from 1962 to '65. The pressures which I think he carried on his own, which very few were privy to, because of... he suspected almost everybody. So only very few, like Dr Goh Keng Swee, Rajaratnam, Mr Barker were really privy. The rest of us, we never get the full

story. So because of that, he was working under pressure, and because of the pressure he was under, he loses his temper, and sometimes because you are not privy to everything, you don't do the right thing, or you don't do the thing at all, so you get into trouble, so he loses his temper. But of course, you know then later... but he'll never say sorry, but he relents.

0:07:32

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Can you describe for us some of the most significant changes perhaps, or transformations that took place between the old colonial service, the self-governing Singaporean service, and then the Malaysian years, and then the post-Malaysian years? How did you think the Civil Service changed? One or two significant pointers or examples.

0:07:26

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

The transition from the colonial time to the first... self-governing thing was something which I didn't really participate in. But the real change was one that you... you are working for an elected government, so you got to make sure you deliver the goods. You got to deliver the goods to the people. So, that's the way of working. You don't take top down sort of measures; but you also have to get feedback from the bottom and work towards that.

0:07:56

[Kirpal Singh](#)

What was the ground? How would you define the ground, in terms of Civil Service?

0:08:00

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

The ground, I think that there was very much because that... initially after the colonial period, the self-governing period... most of them were sort of... not sure. The civil servants were not sure what needs to be done. Even the ministers, some of them were not very sure. So, it was a question of getting directive from the Cabinet to the minister down, so it goes down that way, all the way down.

0:08:26

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Did that work in Malaysia as well, during the short time in Malaysia?

0:08:29

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

During the Malaysia it was different because we had... Singapore had control of most of the things except for defence, foreign affairs, defence... The rest of it Singapore controlled. The Police was under, also security was under Malaysia, so apart from that we sort of ran ourselves. But the only thing, problem was that one of the reasons why we went to Malaysia was to get the common market and that was a lot of bickering going on and arguing so it never really took off.

0:08:56

[Kirpal Singh](#)

When we talk about Societal Leadership and we're doing this interview for the Institute for Societal Leadership here at SMU, one of the areas of discussion is continuity in leadership, and that Societal Leadership demands a kind of continuity which say, political leadership, even if it demands, may not often obtain. To put it more bluntly, people saying, political leaders come and go, but Permanent Secretaries are bosses that stay on. That's why you're called permanent. What's your take on that? [Both laugh]

0:09:29

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

I think that the only permanency is that this is a title that came from the British Civil Service, where we had Permanent Secretaries, and that was to distinguish the Permanent Secretary, the civil servant from the Political Secretary, the secretary of state, or secretary whatever it is... who you know, came and got because of the elections. So that's the only permanency about the position. Nothing else was permanent.

0:09:51

[Kirpal Singh](#)

But sir, now that you have taken up the analogy yourself, you know how when watching Yes Minister, alright, the Permanent Secretaries have the other guys round their little fingers.

0:10:00

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

That's what the Permanent Secretaries like to think. [Both laugh]

0:10:04

[Kirpal Singh](#)

But seriously speaking... one of the later discourses of Ngiam Tong Dow, and others have been precisely what is the role of Permanent Secretaries, the role of

senior civil servants. What's your take on that? You must have been caught in that role many times, right?

0:10:17

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

It's really, what... the role that you play as the Permanent Secretary is the role that your minister and his Cabinet colleagues want you to play. Some of them want you to be an adviser.

0:10:29

[Kirpal Singh](#)

We're talking about the relationship between the political leadership and the leadership at the civil service level. People say that while the political guys come and go, the civil servants at the very top remain. Let me put it in another way, in terms of discussing this nature of that relationship, if you had a very disagreeable minister in charge of the ministry, how would you negotiate your views with such a person?

0:11:02

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

If that sort of situation did arise, the Permanent Secretary wouldn't be there much longer. Either he himself will initiate a transfer out, or the minister would initiate a transfer out, or maybe even worse than that but... it cannot get to a stage where they're so disagreeable they can't really work together, it's impossible.

0:11:25

[Kirpal Singh](#)

I'm sure sir, in your role as Perm. Sec. over many years, some of your junior officers at some point may have cornered you or sought your advice. How did you get on with difficult bosses, or how did you get on with difficult decisions from the top that you don't agree with? What kind of advice did you give them in those situations?

0:11:45

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

I don't give them advice, I gave them instructions.

0:11:47

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Oh, give them instructions. What did you instruct them? Obey?

0:11:49

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

Go ahead and do it.

0:11:50

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Oh, go ahead and do it?

0:11:51

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

If you don't agree and you don't want to do it, then you resign, you quit.

0:11:56

[Kirpal Singh](#)

So, if you have a young officer who really was quite good, but had difficulty, say from an ideological point of view, or some similar such that prevented him from automatically saying "Yes, sir." Were there areas in which the Civil Service during your time that allowed for those kinds of opt out, but not opt out of the system all together?

0:12:23

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

I don't know whether this is an example that fits the scenario that you have painted, but when I was in the Ministry of Education, there was this thing about priority for admission to schools for those who had abortions. I was asked to put this into effect. Mr Ee Peng Liang was in charge of all the Catholic schools and all that. He came to me at the Ministry of Education and said, "You know, this is something that we cannot do. You can't ask our Catholic schools to... when they go to registration, why do we have to give them priority. We cannot do this." I said, "What's your objection?" He said, "No, because our teachers are Catholic and our nuns are Catholic, you can't ask them to do this." I said, "Okay, I tell you what, if I send an officer from Ministry of Education, who's not a Catholic, to go to your school, to go to any one of your schools, and register those who want priority because of abortion, will you be prepared to accept that?" He said, "Let me think about it." Then he came back later. and he said, "Yes, I spoke to the school. and they agreed". So. this is a... so that is an example of where there is a possibility of overcoming even a religious belief to do it. So, if you can find a solution like that, that's workable, compromise and all are prepared to accept, then you go and do it. But if you cannot, then it's just too bad.

0:13:45

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Was the Civil Service in the initial years of Singapore's independence very bent on doing what it felt it should do, what it was impelled perhaps to carry out because of the very strong Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, and whether that, looking back now, was always the right thing to do, especially in these days when we think that connectivity with the people on the ground is ever so important, both for the political leadership as well as for the civil leadership.

0:14:17

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

To a large extent to answer your question on that, in this respect I had one of the best teachers possible. In my early days, I went to PM Lee Kuan Yew's office, and that was the elections of 1963. Just after the referendum to go to Malaysia, then going into Malaysia, that was the elections held. I had to follow with him, around with him to all the constituencies, fifty-one constituencies, everywhere, to give a talk. We had to organise platform stages and all, he would stop and give a talk and all that. The ground level swell there was not really all in favour, because many were still worked up against Malaysia. Various problems, resettlement problems, all the lot... But I could see though, we went down to certain places like Potong Pasir, he'd stand there. Stand there and give a talk, and when he started you could feel the antagonism is there in the air. By the time he finished off, he was such a good persuader, that the people came up and clapped for him, and even the old women came down and kneeled in front of him. It came to the way of persuading, you can move the ground to the way you want to, but he did that all because this is for the benefit of the people in the long run. Now you may not accept, you think it's a bad thing, but in the long run this is for your benefit, but you can still turn the tide around.

0:15:45

[Kirpal Singh](#)

How often, say in your personal experience, did the ministers, the political leadership, gather all of you, either collectively or singly, to get your advice on critical decisions that they were going to make?

0:15:58

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

Not, not... I think very few ministers ever did that, but Lee Kuan Yew did it as a Prime Minister. From time to time he'll call all the Permanent Secretaries to his room, the Cabinet and maybe one or two other ministers might be with him there. He'd ask, "What do you think of this? What do you think of this?" He'll listen to you, at the end of the day, he might have made up his mind, but whatever you said has gone into the Bill.

0:16:23

[Kirpal Singh](#)

What are your views about leadership? What do you think makes for good leadership, and what are the kind of qualities you want to find in a good leader?

0:16:31

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

Vision... drive, and to me to be a good and successful leader, you must have a bit of a devil in you. If you're all compassion, you'll get nothing done. Very often, like a doctor, sometimes you got to hurt the patient in order to cure him. So, a good leader must do the same thing. If you give in to everything, then you're not a leader, you're being led. These are the main qualities I see you must have.

0:16:59

[Kirpal Singh](#)

What about moral turpitude? It's a question that's becoming very big today where you have very efficient leaders in certain sectors of society, but in terms of the morality that they practise, some of us think there might be quite a lot left to be desired. How would you sort of...

0:17:19

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

I don't know. I'm a bit of a skeptic there because having studied philosophy in university... What is ethics? What is moral? What is right and what is wrong? It's very difficult. But one of the things when the PAP (People's Action Party) first came in, one of the first things that PM Lee Kuan Yew did was insist on incorruptibility, no corruption, and that was I think one of the very good things that he did. I tell you when I first joined the ministry, I was a very young officer. One of my jobs was sort of helping to recruit for various... getting applicants and all that. One day, one of the officers working with me, one young clerical officer came to me and said that these applications had been received in the post. There's one letter from somebody, a young man offering fifty dollars if he got this job. So, the officer said, "What shall I do with this?" and I said, "Well, let me take it to my boss." I took it to my boss and asked him, "What to do with this?" He said, "Just ignore it, this is not important." But you know, if we don't want to harm this man, who's this young boy, who's offering fifty dollars? But I think at the same time we must drive home a message to him. He said, "How would you do it? If I asked you to do it how would you do it?" I said, "Well, can't we call the CPIB (Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau) and the CMPB (Central Manpower Base) and set up the... You're my boss, you talk to the boss of the CPIB and tell him about this one and ask him whether he or his officers can call up this young man and explain to him that this is something wrong so that he will not do it again and he will pass the message along." My boss said, "Yes, that's a good idea", so he called up the CPIB boss. CPIB boss thought it was a good idea also, so he arranged to call up the young man. So, this is something you can see that, even at that stage, incorruptibility had been put there and has gone all the way down.

And he... the PM (Prime Minister) in those days would walk around the constituencies and tell about corruption and all that he'd say, "If I take money from somebody, my ministers will take money, my Permanent Secretaries will take money and the postmen will take the stamps off the letters." These are examples that go down to the ground, so these are things that are very, very, very important.

0:19:34

[Kirpal Singh](#)

How would you look at societal leadership, this whole idea of societal leadership?

0:19:38

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

I don't really know what societal leadership is, I know what leadership is. I think all leadership is societal. If you're a leader, you're a leader of a group of people, right? So, if your group of people, all, everyone, a group of people can be a society. It is a form of society. Every society has its own sort of culture. That is societal leadership. Every form of leadership is societal leadership.

0:20:05

[Kirpal Singh](#)

So, you wouldn't make a distinction say between civil leadership, political leadership, religious leadership, and other kinds of leadership. You would say that all leaders actually should subscribe to the core values of a think-all leadership.

0:20:16

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

No, you don't need the same qualities for all types of leadership, because if you're a military dictatorship, what you need is guns and power. If you're fully elected, you'll need the persuasive power and the ability to deliver the goods. So, it depends. But even for the military dictatorship, if you don't deliver the goods, at the end of the day, one of those days, they're going to kick you out. So, you'll no longer be a leader, so you still have to do the minimum.

0:20:43

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Alright sir, I want to round this interview up by asking you to help us maybe to draw attention to a couple of leaders that you personally admire. But before I do that, would you have some thoughts to share on our late leader, now that we're mourning the loss of Mr Lee Kuan Yew?

0:21:02

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

I don't know. Looking back now, there was a time I didn't appreciate him. But looking back now, 1962, 65 when I was Secretary to the PM, then working in very difficult times, you know the sort of vision that he had for Singapore as a whole, and how he went about working about it. Something I'd say is very admirable, although at that time, you got the fallout, the brunt of the trauma and you said, "What the hell am I here for?" But later on, even not too much later on, you see that what he has done, and I think that more than anything else he's a leader that you can put on a pedestal anywhere in the world and he'll be also accepted. But of course, there's sometimes they say well, maybe he's this person that Australia should get or something, but I have told people that if he went to Australia as the Prime Minister, there'll probably be the biggest riot in the world. So, it's not everywhere that this would work, but he carried this well. More than anything else, the vision, and the drive and forcefulness and the one single mindedness with which he can push it through. But at the same time, a very high degree of pragmatism where if the road doesn't... if it's moving on, seems to him the wrong road, he'll just cut it off and... Like Singapore into Malaysia, they said that was the only... in fact he persuaded everyone to vote in favour as the only possible viable solution for Singapore. When it was found to be unworkable and we were thrown out, he just cried, he shed some tears, but at the same time he said, "Move on to something new". So that ultimate pragmatism, I think is very hard to find in any other leader.

0:22:54

[Kirpal Singh](#)

So, added to those qualities of leadership that we talked about earlier on, would I suppose be the idea of decisiveness?

0:23:04

[Herman Hochstad](#)

Decisiveness, I said... you must have decisiveness with a vision. Not just decisive, well you know there's something that hurts me, and I just cut it off. What do I do after that? If I cut off my both legs, how can I walk?

0:23:15

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Right. Now apart from Mr Lee, did you have a lot of time and admire any other Singaporean leader up till now?

0:23:25

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

I'd worked a lot, in fact more with Dr Goh than with Mr Lee. He also is someone I admire, but for his intellect, very great intellect, and the ability to jump from

something, one, all over the place. The creation of the Singapore Bird Park, which was his idea. The reason why he wanted, he said, "Well, you know, Jurong's going to be a dead place with all factories and all that." They wanted to bring people to live there, so he said that there must be something. So Jurong Bird Park came up, a lot of things that came... the Zoo came... it was his idea. He's the one who decided we must have a zoo. Singapore Symphony Orchestra - his idea. A lot of things where you know... the thing is out of his realm - which is finance and economics, he does.

0:24:14

[Kirpal Singh](#)

So anecdotally alright, you worked for both the men, where do you think was the difference between these two, sort of, giants in their own right?

0:24:23

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

They're very different. For one's sake, just an example, when Dr Goh was Minister of Interior and Defence, he goes on the nitty gritty. One day, he asked someone forming the battalions and the number of people required, "Why did you need so many... five people to man that one gun?" He said, "Well, you know, one guy has to do this, the other guy has to do this, this one has to do that, this one the fourth guy." He asked, "What about the fifth guy?" He said, "Nobody knows". So he asked, "What the hell? What the hell is that for?" He said, "Nobody knows." So, he traced back and found that these were the days when the guns were towed by donkeys or horses and the fifth man was to hold the donkey to make sure he doesn't run away when it fires. "So today you have still got a person there? We're short of manpower, take him off!" So, these are the sorts of... you know, he's got these ideas... nobody else thinks about it. But he does.

0:25:14

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Right, and on the world stage, who would be one or two leaders that you have admired?

0:25:20

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

I was one time the High Commissioner to South Africa and was met by Nelson Mandela personally in my own capacity and also accompanied by PM Lee Kuan Yew when he was not PM then, went there to see Mandela. Then subsequently, when Mandela was installed as President, I think Mandela is one of the most outstanding leaders that I have come across. Earlier on, when I went on that mission with Dr Toh Chin Chye and Mr Rajaratnam to go to UN (United Nations) and then the African countries to go around, the two people who struck me the most on that trip were Jomo Kenyatta and his Attorney General then, Tom Mboya, who was assassinated. Tom Mboya I found was a very charismatic man,

and even after I read about him, was a great leader in his own right. He was assassinated. These... and then of course you know the Bamar people, others I met on the same trip. Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia, in his own right, at one time during the Vietnam War and all that, people said he was like a monkey jumping from here to here. But he was the one who saved his country; his country remained semi-neutral, but was never invaded, although it was bombed like hell but still... Sihanouk and the other person in his own way whom I admire as a leader is King Bhumibol of Thailand... in his own quiet way, he is a great leader. These are other people whom I myself personally had met. Of course, others like Gandhi, who you read about and hear about.

0:27:02

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Sure. Do you think that some of these qualities we have been discussing and talking about are enduring and durable, and therefore of needs essential or given the way technology is moving, given the way our interfaith engagements are moving that we need to see the emergence of a new kind of a leader that's quite a different animal from the ones we're used to?

0:27:28

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

If they don't adapt to the times and circumstances, then you cannot be a leader. You must change as time goes on, the circumstances change. If in time robots take over everything, I'll be maybe interviewed by a robot and not by you, and you'd be interviewing a robot also.

0:27:48

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Thank You Sir. Wonderful.

0:27:49

[Herman Hochstadt](#)

Welcome, welcome.