

“Defending Scholarships but not all Scholars”

Address by Eddie Teo, Chairman, Public Service Commission,

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I am very glad to see so many of you here today. When I first discussed this Seminar with the scholar organizers, the question was raised if the topics we chose would attract a large turnout. I was assured that if PSC so directs, no scholar will refuse to attend. Needless to say, I was not at all reassured by that remark. I hope that you are all here because you are keen to participate in this Seminar and not because you have been directed to do so. I look forward very much to hearing your views as much as I do to the opportunity to share my thoughts with you.

One Misfit

2. One reason I decided on this topic was because one of the hardworking organizers gave me such a provocative list of questions on scholarships that I simply had to rise to the challenge. Another reason was a blog I read written by a former teaching scholar. It was beautifully written, full of passion and angst, relating how unhappy she was in the teaching service and how happy she now is, having completed her bond. Her blog attracted a long stream of responses, some from scholars who had broken their bonds, resonating with her sentiments and sympathizing with her plight. A few responses were critical of her complaints, but they were in the minority. Those of us who know the Public Service realize that her sentiments represent those of a minority. There are many more committed scholar public servants who are giving of their best and who regard their public service career as challenging and fulfilling.

3. I disagree with her overall sentiments but I agree with her on one point. She should never have been selected for teaching. PSC should not have awarded her a teaching scholarship when she showed no interest in, or passion for, teaching. She said she had no idea what she wanted in life at 19 and university overseas was a mind-blowing experience that exposed her to the endless opportunities she could have seized instead. But what was revealing was the nature of her complaints. She did not write anything about her experience in teaching. She did not say that teaching gave her no joy and that she could not empathize with or care for the students she taught. Instead, she gave a vague hint of her dismay with office politics and her disagreement with unspecified government policies. I can understand why she chose to cite the latter rather than the

former as reasons for her quitting teaching. I wish her all the best and hope she finds her true niche in life.

Two Emerging Trends

4. My purpose today is to draw your attention to two emerging trends, both of which seek to knock down the system of scholarships unique to Singapore. (No other country in the world awards so many government scholarships to our best and brightest students). The first trend is that of a handful of scholars feeling a little guilty that they are privileged. I am beginning to notice a few scholars asking why they are being singled out for grooming for future leadership. Why are we giving so many scholarships to top students and so few bursaries to the poor and needy? Is this false modesty on their part or guilt, or both? Is this the consequence of their awareness of ground resentment that we are becoming too elitist a society? I want to reassure this group of scholars that while we should guard against elitism and arrogance, there are good reasons why we should continue with the scholarships system.

5. The second trend consists of a growing number of critics – including the media, some politicians and members of the public – who seem to want the government to stop giving scholarships on account of the bad behavior of some scholars. This is more difficult to defend against because it is true that a few scholars have allowed success to go to their heads. Part of the problem lies in the sometimes excessive way we celebrate individual academic excellence in Singapore. Part of it lies in the unrealistic expectations some scholars have about their jobs in the public service. But the fact that a handful of scholars give a bad name to the system does not mean that the system itself is rotten. In other words, we must improve the system, not abandon it. And you have an important part to play in this because how you conduct yourself in future will either increase the resentment of the public, politicians and media or reassure them that scholars are not as bad as they are made out to be.

Scholarships Are Bad

6. In recent years, there have been some adverse rumblings about our scholarships system. When the government spends so much money on so few people, taxpayers have a right to grumble. Not all taxpayers will be happy – but among the happy ones will be your parents. (However, as the previously cited case shows, sometimes, even those who benefit from scholarships do not appreciate their good fortune). When the government justifies the scholarship system by saying that candidates are chosen on merit, it will invite questions on the criteria used. Are we choosing only people with high academic scores or high IQ and is this intellectual elite the best group to lead Singapore? Are we increasingly choosing people from a narrowing base – same schools, same family backgrounds, same universities? Is this elitist system producing public servants with no empathy for, and understanding of, the problems and grievances of ordinary

Singaporeans? How can they be good public servants if they think they are privileged and believe that their role is to lord over, rather than serve, the public?

7. Although the public resentment could be due in part to envy, it will be wrong for us to assume that there is no basis for such fears. Hence, we have tried our best to address them. Intellectual ability is a pre-requisite and is still of prime importance. It is a necessary, but not sufficient condition. We have always looked for many more qualities beyond academic excellence, and these include integrity, commitment, leadership and soft skills. A candidate without these qualities will not do well in the public service. Mindful that we should not compromise on our principle of meritocracy, we try to ensure that we have not missed out deserving candidates by casting our net as wide as possible so that we can take in candidates from schools other than Raffles and Hwa Chong where students who do well at earlier stages of their education tend to congregate. We pay special attention to those from a humble background to draw out those who have great potential but may not yet have the polish and finesse of their more socio-economically advantaged peers. And we encourage our scholars to study in countries other than the US and UK. In order to enhance their understanding of the ground, many scholar public servants are exposed to operational postings. This helps keep them in touch with reality. Those from a humble background will be reminded of their roots while those from a well-off background will hopefully step out of their cocoon and learn about the rest of Singapore.

8. But despite all our best effort, there is no failsafe method of ensuring that every one of our scholar public servants is sensitive to ground issues and truly wants to serve. There is a risk that if scholars we recruit fail to understand and empathize with the concerns of ordinary Singaporeans, the public mood will change. Should the public, extrapolating from the few to the many, come to increasingly question whether scholars make good public servants, it will begin to withdraw its support for our scholarship system. There is no guarantee that a future government in Singapore will have the same political courage as the present one. In most democracies, very few governments will defend a system on the basis of principle in the face of overwhelming voter unhappiness. If the public outcry against scholarships becomes deafening, the government may one day decide to drastically cut or even stop awarding scholarships altogether.

Scholarships Are Good

9. Singapore has been able to build on the scholarship system started during the colonial days because we have a government which believes in meritocracy and has the political courage to act on this belief. More importantly, our people have so far joined government in celebrating academic excellence and, despite some misgivings, continue to support the idea that we should develop and nurture our most outstanding students for future leadership. Many governments do not have our system. Some do not believe in meritocracy and offer scholarships mostly to their own kind. Some may believe in

meritocracy but dare not practise it because the political culture does not allow them to do so.

10. Over the years, our scholars have provided the pool of leaders for the public service and elsewhere. We think we have done quite well in selecting the right people. A scholarship is not an escalator to success. For a scholar to progress in his career, hard work, demonstrated performance, and a commitment to public service are required. Not all scholars succeed, but enough do to justify the continuation of the system. It must be so. If more and more scholars break bond or fail in their studies or career, then it makes no sense to continue with the system. At the same time, the system must allow non-scholars to also rise to the top, in case they are late bloomers, or we miss them out in the earlier selection process for another reason. If we look at the top of the public service today, 16 of our 20 permanent secretaries are scholars. It shows that our system is good enough to spot potential leaders from among our scholars but flexible enough to allow for those with talent to be developed and rise to the top even if they did not start out as scholars.

Bond Breaking & Attrition

11. At this point, let me give you my own take on a subject that has generated controversy from time to time – bond breaking. Having spent a great deal of money and effort on a scholar, it is natural for the government to be disappointed if the scholar leaves before his bond is up. Recruiting a scholar for the public service is more than a commercial contract. Serving the nation cannot be the same as serving a company. As a public servant you are entrusted with the lives of your fellow citizens and are supposed to deliver public goods in the public interest. You are serving Singapore, not Boston Consulting Group or Citibank. You are tasked to improve the lives of Singaporeans, not raise the bottom line of your firm by making more profits from consumers.

12. But do we expect 100% of our scholars to stay throughout their bond period? No. Do we expect a significant majority of them to stay? Yes. Attrition figures are important as warning indicators to alert us if there is a problem, but they hide many things. When the various Ministries come to brief PSC and present their staff attrition figures to me, I often ask them if the attrition is a good attrition or a bad attrition. What I mean is “Are you losing the right people or the wrong people?” If the best officers leave, and only the mediocre remain, the public service is in big trouble. We need enough of our best people to stay and provide a continuous flow of leaders. Likewise, with scholars. No matter how robust our selection process, and no matter how astute our PSC members are in judging people, a handful of candidates who are not suitable for public service will manage to slip through. Among them will be those who lack commitment and have little interest in the public service and merely want either the prestige or the funds that come with a scholarship to study overseas. A few may be smart, perhaps even committed, but have character flaws that show up after they join service.

13. If those who are unsuitable for the public service break bond, we should be disappointed that we failed to sieve them out earlier, but we should not be unhappy. However, we still get upset with scholars who break their bond without serving even one day after they finish their studies. They have wasted the PSC's time and effort and used taxpayers' money upfront for their selfish purpose. Even if there is no scholarship quota, there is an opportunity cost to every taxpayer dollar spent on scholars. In the period 1999 to 2008, there were 9 such PSC scholars out of a total of 791 scholarship holders recruited. Although this is a low attrition rate of 1%, we would like to see it go down to as close to zero as possible.

14. There are also some scholars who finish their bond and leave for positive reasons. Some scholars move on because they want a change in career. Nothing wrong with that especially if they stay in Singapore or contribute to Singapore in other ways. Others want to care for their young children. As a family-friendly nation, we should applaud such a motive. A few get invited to tea and become politicians. Others go on to become successful entrepreneurs and managers in the corporate world. And if they stay in Singapore or work in Singapore firms overseas, they can still make a contribution to Singapore.

Good Management is Key

15. However, if the Public Service is losing more and more good officers, then it ought to be concerned. Good officers often leave because they have been poorly managed. The Public Service should nurture, develop, support and reward all good officers, including scholars, so that they feel appreciated and are motivated to stay. Since public servants cannot publicize their achievements, it is all the more important that they receive signals from within the service if they have done well. Unlike the early days, when officers assume they are doing well if nobody yells at them, young officers nowadays like to be told upfront about their performance.

16. My sampling of the views of the younger officers suggest to me that they yearn for better communication from the top on crucial matters such as their next posting. They say they will accept unpopular postings better if they are given a hearing and it is explained to them how the job fits into their career development and what they can learn from it.

17. However, Lim Siong Guan, the former Head of Civil Service, had what I thought was a good rebuttal for scholars who griped about their postings. He used to tell them that going wherever the Public Service decided to send them was the best way to develop

themselves. If they were to choose their postings, many would never get out of their comfort zone and so would not grow.

18. Our young scholars also seem to have difficulty relating how their actual work serves the bigger purpose of the Public Service. Some also expect to meet their Minister frequently. They should realize that they may not get to meet or work directly with the Minister in the early phase of their career. It helps if present-day Ministers reach deep into the organization to seek the views of younger officers, as the first generation Ministers like Goh Keng Swee and Lee Kuan Yew used to do. But if that does not happen so often nowadays, then the supervisors of our young scholars must make up for it by giving them enough challenging work to sustain their interest and add meaning to what they do. Hence, good leaders who manage well are crucial at all levels of the Public Service. Better still if as leader cum manager they also mentor well, because I find that some young officers need someone in authority they can turn to for advice or just someone who can give him or her a sympathetic hearing. I believe that the time spent listening is often worth investing in.

Less Scholarships, More Bursaries?

19. PSC's responsibility is to develop the best talent we have, for the Public Service, regardless of the family background of the candidate. PSC is not under a budget constraint and gives scholarships strictly on merit up to the limits of worthy candidates. Hence, giving a scholarship to a well-off student is not at the expense of one from a poorer background. We should not discriminate against those who are well-off on the grounds of social justice. It is good that students who are well-off are still attracted to PSC scholarships and public service. It would be bad for the country if only students from poorer backgrounds consider a public service career, because it means the elite and well-off have turned their backs on society and no longer want to serve the country.

20. I admire those among our young who care about the growing income disparity in Singapore and are concerned about the bottom half of our society. But does this mean that we need to cut down on scholarships in order to give more bursaries? Does PSC need to be responsible for giving out grants and bursaries? My answer to both is "No". Our local universities already disburse grants, bursaries and interest-free loans to those who cannot afford a university education but qualify for entry. The Ministry of Education has disbursed sufficient funds to the local universities to ensure that any needy student who gains entry into university is not deprived of an opportunity to study there. This is the government's policy.

21. More non-government scholarship agencies should focus on giving awards to those below the top academic tier but are good enough to fulfill the requirements for university entry, both locally and abroad.

22. Your organizing committee suggested that overseas education should be made accessible to all. I cannot agree that the government should fund those who are in need but do not meet our criteria, to study overseas. If they can qualify for entry into a local university, they should study in Singapore. They will get a good university education in NUS, NTU and SMU and their degrees will not hold them back if they perform well in their career, in or outside the Public Service. In all my years in Public Service, I have never witnessed anyone being promoted or not promoted on account of his university background.

Good Scholars – Past & Present

23. Our best scholars know they have to start from the bottom in order to reach the top. They realize that to gain the respect of others, they have to gain experience before they can make a meaningful contribution. They willingly go to operational jobs and get their hands dirty. To them, each posting is a challenge and an opportunity to learn new things, even if there are low moments. They learn to take the rough with the smooth. They know that implementation is unglamorous but vital to policy-making. They realize that they need to convince others of their competence through actual performance and should not expect their potential to propel them upwards. They know that no outcome can be due only to their own brilliance, but is the combined effort of their team. They do not look down on non-scholars because they know that many non-scholars have deeper knowledge and more wisdom.

Policy Making is Operational

24. Why is it important for scholars to start at the bottom? While learning the ropes and acquiring a dose of humility are worthwhile benefits in themselves, there is in fact a much more fundamental reason. Many scholars say they want to join the Management Associate Program and become Administrative Officers because they want to “make policy”. But they fail to realize that a policy is only as good as how it is implemented. Policy making and implementation go hand in hand. To make good policy, officers need a feel for the ground and an understanding for practical implementation constraints. You cannot conceive of good policies or make improvements to existing policies just from first principles or what you have learnt at university. You have to understand our society and economy, how things work, what can be done and what cannot. It is not enough to focus on formulating a policy without going into the details of how it should best be carried out. As a public servant, you are responsible for both.[2] We do not have a system where scholars think and non-scholars do. A scholar must be able to both think and do. A well conceptualized policy will fail if it is poorly implemented. A public servant who does not anticipate ground reactions and think through the impact that a particular policy will have on people is a poor public servant. An operational job enables you to learn first-

hand how to implement policies and discover for yourself what the possible pitfalls are when you deal with the real world.

Recollections of Older Scholars

25. I asked a few Permanent Secretaries and Deputy Secretaries who had been scholars to share with me their recollection of the first few years they spent in the public service. What they told me may be of interest to you as you embark on your public service career.

26. A Police scholar started as an Assistant Investigations Officer, doing frontline work on suicides, thefts, molestations, etc. The posting taught him people skills because he had to work with non-scholars and developed his empathy for the public when he dealt with crime victims who sought his help.

27. Another started work as a Statistician where she spent her first week figuring out what she was supposed to do. She shared a phone with a subordinate, and because she was more senior, the phone was placed on her desk. But she soon realized that her subordinate needed the phone more than she did, and she therefore placed it on the other desk instead. That experience taught her that function was more important than position.

28. When another officer started work, he had a subordinate who was old enough to be his father. Their ideas were often at odds, but he soon realized that while he had lots of knowledge, his subordinate had a lot more wisdom. Over time, he learned to complement his own analysis with his subordinate's suggestions.

29. Another recalls how she had to do many things herself – photocopying papers for meetings, receiving and serving visitors and taking lots of minutes during meetings, sometimes as many as three sets a day. She had to be very nice to the typists in the Typing Pool in order to ensure that her work did not end up at the bottom of the pile.

Young Scholars – Some Cause For Concern

30. Most of the current generation of young scholars are responsible and dedicated, but a few have a poor attitude and misplaced expectations. Some are very choosy about their postings and tend to place their personal interest above organizational interest. Many Management Associates or MAs want to go to MTI or MOF for their first postings and get upset if they are posted elsewhere. One was so upset that he resigned, breaking his bond. When some young MAs were asked to go to NTUC to observe retrenchment

exercises and learn about what impact the current economic recession is having on ordinary Singaporeans, one MA asked “What is a retrenchment exercise?”.

31. Why should the Public Service be worried that some scholars are like this? First, if our scholars seek to advance only their self-interest, it indicates that they may be unable to work in a team. Much of public service work today involves teamwork because Singapore’s problems are becoming more complex and involve many Ministries, and no single individual can solve them. Besides, public policy making is always the product of a group effort, of repeated discussions and revisions. From the first idea to the Cabinet paper, proposals will involve many people and countless drafts. Some young officers are not used to this and do not feel a close enough sense of ownership with the final product. This is the way government works and is in fact a strength of our system because this is the way we gather different perspectives and considerations into a well thought-through solution. Second, if fewer and fewer young scholars desire ground postings, more and more of them may become divorced from ground issues and will start to lose their empathy for ordinary Singaporeans. The problem is not yet so widespread that it cannot be rolled back. There is still time for the Public Service to correct the trend.

Conclusion

32. Looking at the Public Service as a whole, I think there is enough evidence for me to end on an upbeat note. I was present at a dinner with Tony Blair recently and he told us how, during his recent visits as a public governance consultant to African and Arab countries, they all invariably ask him to make them into another Singapore. It would be even better if Blair hears this from advanced countries, but it still indicates that Singapore has a good global reputation. For such a tiny country, we have not done too badly. This well-deserved reputation is in no small degree due to our Public Service. Things work well in Singapore because we continue to have a continuous stream of able, efficient, effective and empathetic public servants. And much of that is in turn due to our scholarships system, which enables the Public Service to receive its fair share of Singapore's top talent.

33. I am sure that most of you are looking forward to joining and working in this Public Service. To me, it was a fascinating career – with tremendous variety and important assignments. Don’t expect every day to be fascinating and important but stay contented by never losing sight of who you are serving – your people and your country. That was enough to sustain me through 37 years in the Public Service. Not once did I think of leaving. I hope you will enjoy your future career as much as I did mine.

34. Let me end by quoting two friends who have been giving thoughtful advice to our Public Service. Both coincidentally make similar points in describing the job of a civil servant. One is Peter Shergold, who used to run the Australian Public Service:

“ Civil service is a tough job. It is not easy to give advice fearlessly.... or to deliver policy decisions uncomplainingly when that advice has not been accepted...The ability of civil service leaders to shape public policy comes at a personal cost. To a considerable extent, their influence is wielded behind closed doors. Their public voice needs to be carefully modulated. It requires leaders able to serve successive ministers with equal dedication. For all these reasons, the civil service is not a job for everyone. Yet,.....civil service has its distinctive rewards. It is a job that has meaning and purpose. It involves the provision of public value, not shareholder gain, with benefits delivered to citizens, not consumers. How well it is done affects, to a lesser or greater extent, the future well-being of society.”

35. The other is Jocelyn Bourgon, who ran the Canadian Public Service:

“The public sector is not for everyone. You must believe in the importance of the State. You must be passionate about what the Government can accomplish. Good policies can change the course of events and improve the standard of living and quality of life of citizens.”

36. Thank you.