

RESPONSE BY MR LAWRENCE WONG, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE, MINISTRY OF COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION, AT THE COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY DEBATE ON MCI'S BUDGET ON FRIDAY, 8 MAR 2013

STRENGTHENING PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT

Listening Carefully, Consulting Widely

1. Minister Yaacob earlier shared that the Government will listen carefully and consult widely in the formulation of policies. Let me now elaborate further on how we intend to do this.

2. Several members – Mr Zaqy Mohamad, Mr Baey Yam Keng, Mr David Ong and Mr Seng Han Thong – have highlighted the need for the Government to involve Singaporeans in the policy-making process. I agree fully with them – our policies are meant to improve the lives of Singaporeans, and must take into account the views of Singaporeans.

3. Public engagement is an important part of the policy-making process. It is neither new nor something that we are just doing now. In fact, it is something that we have been doing all along. But over the years, we have increasingly intensified our efforts to engage on a wide range of issues, with as many stakeholders as possible, and through various platforms, be it dialogues, webchats, townhalls or discussion forums.

4. In 2012, there were more than 30 public consultation efforts across the different ministries. Beyond these 30 consultation efforts, there were many others - informal exchanges, focus group discussions and so on, that took place across the different ministries and agencies.

5. However, as highlighted by Mr Baey Yam Keng and some other Members, there is certainly scope for us to do more. And we can still do better to improve the level of citizen involvement in our policy making process.

6. I would like to assure Members that the Government will continue to look for meaningful and relevant ways to engage Singaporeans and involve them in policy making. Our aim is to give Singaporeans a sense of ownership over the issues and policies that matter to them. We will improve our capabilities to gather ground sentiments and public

feedback. We will also distill lessons from our recent experiences including the White Paper on Population, and then see how we can do better.

7. One key strategy is to enhance REACH, which is now part of MCI. REACH will take on a larger role to spearhead engagement efforts across the whole of government.

8. Mr Baey has asked about the effectiveness of REACH. Last year, REACH alone conducted 21 engagement activities - both face-to-face and online. It received an average of 5,500 feedback inputs a month from Singaporeans, a six-fold increase in feedback received since REACH was first launched in 2006. So REACH has done quite a fair bit and it will continue to do so. It will step up its efforts of face-to-face engagements with various segments of the community. For example, this year, REACH will be launching a series of dialogues for Professionals, Managers, Executives and Technicians, or PMETs, to delve deeper into issues facing this group, who make up more than half of Singapore's workforce.

9. REACH is also making greater use of social media platforms, including Facebook, to make it even more convenient for Singaporeans to provide feedback and for REACH to stay connected with them.

10. Besides working through REACH, MCI itself will also help to coordinate the building of public communication and engagement capabilities across government agencies. Mr Seng Han Thong mentioned this and highlighted the role of officers from the Information Service, an important group of people who are crucial in our public engagement efforts. Our Information Officers form the backbone of our public engagement efforts. We are proud of them and we are building up their capabilities. As Mr Seng mentioned, we have appointed a new Chief of Government Communications so as to bring more expertise, experience and leadership to the service.

11. Some members, Mr Zaqy Mohd and Mr Baey Yam Keng, have shared how people sometimes question the value of giving feedback to the government. I understand the concerns. Government agencies can and must do more to consult at the early stages of the policy process, and consider public inputs given seriously and with an open mind. Agencies also need to do more to close the loop after the feedback has been given – to explain the reasons for their decisions, so that people

can understand how their inputs helped to shape the final decision. Some ministries are already doing this, but clearly we need to level up the efforts across all our public agencies.

12. At the same time I think we must also recognise that consultation is also a two-way street. Just as the Government needs to be open to different views, so too must the participants of public consultation. Individuals and civic groups are entitled to expect every serious proposal to be considered, but they must also accept that not all suggestions can be accepted by the Government, especially when there are different and often competing viewpoints among Singaporeans.

13. So the key to effective consultation is that all parties must take part with a spirit of mutual respect for the legitimacy of the process and perspectives of all participants. And there are many examples of consultations undertaken in this spirit, which have led to important changes and shifts in policies.

14. Mr Baey asked for examples; let me cite two. The Enabling Masterplan initiated by the then-MCYS to address the needs of persons with disabilities and their caregivers - the masterplan was very much the result of a process of co-creation, involving NGOs and other stakeholders.

15. Another example was when MOH recently extended MediShield to cover newly diagnosed congenital and neonatal conditions. This also arose from suggestions including those made during a public consultation on enhancements to MediShield, as well as from participants at the Our Singapore Conversation (OSC) sessions.

16. Going forward, the OSC will be an important process for us to discuss the broader directions for our nation, and how policies should change to support these new directions. We have had many organisations and interest groups organise their own ground-up dialogues as part of the OSC. There have been many OSC sessions and through this process we aim to involve as many Singaporeans as possible from a wide cross-section of society.

17. One participant said of her experience in the OSC: "I must say that my experience of the SG Conversation opened my eyes to other Singaporeans...I do encourage people to go and speak their minds, and

learn from fellow Singaporeans. If we are all Singaporeans, we do have a duty to engage in a dialogue about our future.”

18. I think it is very encouraging to hear this. We have heard similar feedback from many other participants in OSC. For any democracy to work, our citizens must be prepared to engage deeply on the issues that matter to them. We already see this happening, as Mr Zaqy Mohamad said, the feedback in terms of quality is getting better. In the letter columns of our newspapers and in various online platforms, we now see more Singaporeans debating with one another advocating their respective positions sometimes before the government agency has time to reply to a letter you see a reply from another Singaporean. These are positive trends – they demonstrate our peoples’ desire to play a part in shaping the future of Singapore through robust dialogue and conversations, not only with the Government, but also with each other.

19. Sometimes, passions are aroused during these debates. That is okay, because the issues we are discussing are serious issues that affect the lives of all Singaporeans. But it is important that we do not vilify those who disagree with us, or tear down each other in the process of debate. Ultimately, we all want the best for our country and for Singaporeans. At the end of the day, we must be able to look past all of our differences, all of our disagreements, and still forge a common future. For there are far more things that unite us than divide us.

20. That is what we are seeking to do in the OSC. So I will encourage all Singaporeans to participate actively in this process of the national conversation. We are now moving to the next phase of the conversation where we will dive deeper into the concerns raised during the earlier phase of a more open dialogue. There will be a range of issues to discuss, and various forums and sessions where people can sign up to join the conversation in shaping our future Singapore.

21. I would like to assure the House that the Government is committed to consult as widely as it can, to listen deeply and to incorporate the views of Singaporeans when formulating its policies. I acknowledge that there are still areas to improve. But through the OSC, through efforts by REACH, through MCI’s Information Service and through the efforts of all public agencies, we will do more to promote public engagement.

Reaching out to Singaporeans via multiple platforms

22. One area which Member talked about and I think we can do more as we are still somewhat behind the curve - is in social media. We recognise that new media usage is rising and that more and more Singaporeans now turn to online platforms for information and news.

23. This is why, as many Members observe, you would see that Government agencies have been stepping up their online presence. It is not limited to Ministers going on Facebook, because you would see that many agencies are using a combination of Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, mobile applications and other digital platforms. Our statistics show an increase across the board. But beyond the statistics, it is how the agencies use these platforms, so I will cite some examples.

24. For example, the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) uses several social media platforms to communicate with the public – it has a Facebook page to reinforce the importance of fire safety and share information on the work of SCDF personnel, and it also uses Twitter to provide the public with time-sensitive updates during emergencies. The Singapore Police Force's Facebook page, with a strong 300,000 fan base, also reaches out to the community to help solve crimes and ensure public safety with timely advisories.

25. The Gov.sg website also has mobile applications for the Apple and Android platforms. To tap on the increasing popularity of tablets such as the iPad, we will be launching an upgraded Gov.sg application. Through the new application, we can provide users access to the latest news updates and services across all Government agencies from a single platform. Subscribers will get latest news alerts, videos, publications, government data and will be able to share them easily with friends online.

26. Parliamentary debates are also an important way for public to know more about policies, and I think Mr Zaqy Mohamad alluded to this earlier. I am pleased to inform Members that MCI will be working with MediaCorp to enhance coverage of Parliamentary proceedings. We will work with MediaCorp to upload footage from Question Time to CNA's microsite. We will also look into lengthening the archival period for Parliament videos from the current one month. This will allow the public to fully follow the debates at a convenient pace.

27. The Government will also put out more short video clips, using multimedia to explain issues to the public, something that Mr Zaqy Mohamad had also suggested. Last year, for example, we produced videos that touched on a wide range of topics, from the GST Voucher to the Green Man Plus scheme for pedestrian crossing, and we will have more this year.

28. But communication online is not the same as the traditional broadcast medium. Social media is not a one way broadcast; it is not a monologue. Rather it is about dialogue; it is about participation; it is about engaging in an ongoing and meaningful conversation with stakeholders.

29. Some public agencies are already actively engaging in this space, but the efforts are still uneven across the government. We will need to build up capabilities across all agencies, and engage Singaporeans actively through social media.

30. An important part of this engagement is to ensure that our conversations are grounded in facts and our citizens are well-informed on policies, a point highlighted by Mr Zaqy Mohamad. We already have websites like *Factually* where people can find key facts relating to government policies, and other agencies have similar sites like *HDBSpeaks* by HDB and *Mythbusters* by MOT. But these platforms alone are not sufficient. It is one thing to have the platform where you clarify facts, but I think it is more important to engage online, to be present to engage, so that any distortions, half-truths and untruths can be corrected quickly, and we can all agree on a certain set of facts to debate from.

31. While we do more through social media, Mr Seng Han Thong has also reminded that there are Singaporeans who may not be comfortable using such platforms and we need to be mindful of these Singaporeans, and how we get our message across to them and engage them.

32. I would like to assure Mr Seng, and other Members of this House that the Government will continue to leverage on both traditional and digital platforms to ensure that we engage with a wide spectrum of Singaporeans. We recognise that there are very diverse audiences, and our messages have to be better customised and targeted at these

different audiences in order to resonate with them. And that is something which we will be mindful of.

33. We will also intensify our ground efforts to reach out to Singaporeans, and engage them directly, face-to-face, whether it is through townhalls, policy forums and dialogue sessions. Many of my colleagues in this House already do this, and we will continue to do more.

Conclusion

34. Public engagement is not a one-off effort. It is an on-going process to build relationships between the people and the Government, so as to shape better policies and improve the lives of all Singaporeans. The Government will do its part by stepping up our engagement and communications efforts so that together with all Singaporeans, we can build a better Singapore for the future.

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