

## IPS Young Singaporeans Conference 2014: “Game-Changers”

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On 22 September 2014, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) hosted the Young Singaporeans Conference 2014. The conference gathered about 80 up-and-coming young Singaporeans from various sectors to take part in an envisioning exercise and engage in dialogue sessions with several distinguished speakers, including Senior Minister of State (Law and Education) Indraneel Rajah; Professor Kishore Mahbubani, Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy; and Bilahari Kausikan, Ambassador-at-Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The focus of this year’s conference was the envisioning exercise, in which participants were invited to imagine Singapore in 2040, her 75th anniversary since independence. This year’s theme was “Game-Changers” — overarching megatrends that would heavily influence how the future might turn out.

Head facilitator, Dawn Yip brought participants through a series of linked activities that comprised the envisioning exercise. The goal of the envisioning exercise was to get participants to think carefully and critically about the future. They were asked to keep the following questions in mind as they completed the activities:

- What kind of home do we want Singapore to be?
- What opportunities and challenges will arise from the game-changers that you have pinpointed?
- What are the consequences, and how and to what extent will they affect our lives?
- What aspirations will we have?
- How will we achieve our goals in the future?

The first activity involved a group discussion where participants thought about and discussed game-changers that would impact Singapore most between now and 2040. Replies were far-ranging and extremely thought-provoking. A brief snapshot of examples of proposed game-changers ranged from advanced computing and technologies, to the changing political and social landscape of Singapore, to Singaporean identity and the extent to which we are proud to call ourselves Singaporean. Additionally, some questioned the possible geopolitical changes that could take place around us, the potential polarisation of interest groups in civil society, and the implications of increasing mechanisation and computerisation of jobs and tasks.

Next, participants were tasked to come up with vignettes, or short scenarios, by combining game-changers. These vignettes were based on the previously identified game-changers, putting two or more game-changers together to construct a brief story of how the trends would interact and their eventual outcome in 2040. Here, participants put together scenarios with positive, mixed and negative outcomes. For instance, one combined increasing globalisation with the current push for more alternative pathways, which would in turn lead to a more modular educational syllabus and students with greater global exposure — finally pushing Singapore to be a paragon of educational rigour and flexibility.

Another vignette combined the ageing population in Singapore and the political pressures on the government, causing a shift to a more welfare state model and the government to increasingly give in to the demands of the populace and providing support for healthcare and retirement adequacy. This would cause a drain on finances, placing Singapore in debt and necessitating a huge increase in taxes.

Finally, participants took the most thought-provoking and plausible vignettes and weaved them into a coherent narrative, placing events along a timeline to identify specific events that would happen between now and 2040. This timeline was then placed on display for all groups to view. Participants could then vote for what they believed were the most convincing and interesting scenarios. The three groups that won the most votes presented their narratives to the Guest of Honour, Indranee Rajah.

The winning narrative conceived a part-dystopian scenario in which Singapore becomes a corporation-state with a highly globalised diaspora, leading to a weakening identity of what it means to be Singaporean. This eventually leads to Singapore being defended by mercenaries and floated on the New York Stock Exchange, with people literally being allowed to buy a stake in the nation. The narrative ends with the diaspora realising that Singapore cannot exist as a corporation, who then buy back all the shares to reform Singapore as one nation.

As IPS Director Janadas Devan noted in his opening address, we cannot predict the future, but we can challenge, push and probe to arrive at a clearer view of the questions. Overall, the conference demonstrated that young Singaporeans do have the tools to think out of the box and be creative, coming up with scenarios that were both plausible and unexpected. The questions asked during the conference may not have easy answers, but it is the nature of attempting to predict the future, and we hope that it has been an enriching experience for all who attended.

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