‘Think-tanks crucial’ as policymaking gets more complex

Institute of Policy Studies will launch ‘Social Lab’ to suss out challenges

BY RACHEL CHANG

THE need for independent think-tanks like the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) is even greater in the more complex policymaking environment now, Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong said last night.

Speaking at the 25th anniversary of the organisation he had envisioned, he said Singapore needs to change the way it governs itself, and think-tanks “can play a crucial role in facilitating the engagement between citizens and the Government”.

This involves advancing policy conversations in the public domain in new and innovative ways, he added.

To that end, Mr Goh disclosed IPS is launching a “Social Lab” this month, a polling and research unit that will collect and analyse data on key social challenges.

Earlier, the Lab’s deputy director, IPS senior research fellow Leong Chan Hoong, told The Straits Times it will be in the mode of outfits like the National Opinion Research Centre (NORC) in the United States.

NORC is behind the General Social Survey that has tracked changing social attitudes among Americans since the 1970s.

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser will head the Social Lab, and its first project will be tracking a representative group of Singaporeans over many years for a detailed picture of income dynamics, social mobility and political attitudes.

These longitudinal studies, often done in other countries, can show what works and what does not over the long term, and thus help the Government make better policy, said Mr Goh.

He was giving the keynote address at the gala dinner at Shangri-La Hotel. Among those present were former president S R Nathan and ambassador-at-large Chan Heng Chee, who was IPS’ founding director.

IPS director Janadas Devan said $2.5 million has been raised for a fellowship named after Mr Nathan, for the study of Singapore.

In his speech, Mr Goh urged the IPS to carve out a credible place for itself online.

While views expressed online may not always be thoughtful, they still represent the mood and views of a section of Singapore society that should not be ignored, he said.

IPS can add to the diversity of online discourse by having a strong presence in cyberspace.

It should pro-actively engage online media practitioners, he added.

Reflecting on the IPS’ genesis, Mr Goh said that even in 1988, “there was a sense that the Government and the public sector could not possibly have a monopoly on good ideas”.

Policymakers benefit by mining the wealth of expertise and experience outside government.

At the same time, IPS can help ordinary Singaporeans make better sense of the tectonic changes affecting society and what these mean for them, he said.

“Studying Singapore is an important and serious endeavour,” he said. “If we don’t devote resources and energies to studying Singapore, who will?”

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