



2nd CPPS Youth Public Policy Roundtable

**“Generation Y: The Stars of the New Malaysia
– Maximising Your Potential”**

12 August 2015

**Malaysian Houses of Parliament,
Kuala Lumpur**



** The views expressed in this document do not necessarily represent those of CPPS. They are rather a broad representation of the various personal, political and organisational opinions of those in attendance on the day.*

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Introductory Remarks

Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam, Chairman, Centre for Public Policy Studies (CPPS) - Asian Strategy & Leadership Institute (ASLI) / Group Advisor, Sunway Group

In his opening speech, Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam described the 'Generation Y' – Malaysia's young adults - as being the 'stars of new Malaysia'. It is crucial, he said, that today's youth are able to maximise their potential in order to contribute to the country's development. Tan Sri Navaratnam expressed scepticism about the supposed special character of 'Generation Y': of course, the world has changed, he



said, but the elemental aspirations of young people remain the same. Young people, he said, seek opportunities to realise their academic and professional potential, just like previous generations did. In his view, younger generations are more tech-savvy and better informed than previous ones, but their values and priorities remain the same as before: "You're not special," he remarked. "We all want the same." At the same time, he praised what he saw as the drive of today's youth to actively shape the country and carry out positive changes.

Tan Sri Navaratnam further emphasised the commonalities between today's challenges and those faced by previous generations and pointed out that life is always full of challenges. "We have all struggled," he said. He called on Malaysian youths to abandon any sense of entitlement. Quoting John F. Kennedy, he told the youth to ask "not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country". It is fine to want to be an entrepreneur or a millionaire, he said, but you also have to think of how to serve Malaysia, how to give back to the community. "Don't be selfish, work for your country," he advised his audience. In particular, he stressed the need for younger Malaysians to strengthen national unity by leaving aside racism and ethnic stereotypes and working side by side with people from other creeds, ethnicities and cultures, under the principle of equality.

Finally, Tan Sri Navaratnam invited Malaysia's youth to actively engage in the shaping of the country, whether by joining civil service, the private sector, NGOs or academia. He urged all young people to transition from complaints to action, and observed that there are many paths to participation. 'Do your contribution, don't feel hopeless because you will shape your future' was his final advice. Tan Sri Navaratnam further thanked CPPS-ASLI for organising the event as well as the audience for taking part. He said that he looked forward to the discussions of the roundtable and invited all the participants to share their ideas and perspectives.

Keynote Address

Y.B. Senator Chong Sin Woon, Deputy Minister of Education

Senator Chong began by thanking CPPS for inviting him to present the keynote address on the theme of 'Youth Empowerment'. He noted that the roundtable aimed at identifying and understanding the perceptions, concerns, and struggles faced by the younger generation, with a view to developing strategies to empower them.

This year's theme for International Youth Day was entitled 'Youth Civic Engagement'. According to YB Senator Chong, by merging the three concepts - 'Generation Y characteristics', 'Youth Empowerment', and 'Youth Civic Engagement' - and formulating possible solutions to address the weakness of the current education system. Such solutions could consequently contribute to nation-building and the realisation of Malaysia's development ambitions.



He went on to explain that Gen-Y's characteristics are encapsulated in the acronym **REST**, whereby:

R stands for *Rebellious*, but also *Resourceful and Resistant*;

E for *Egoistic*, but also *Efficient and Effective*;

S for *Self-centred*, but also *Smart and ready to Serve*; and

T stands for *Trend-setter* and *Tech-savvy*.

Having regard to the above, he then went on to criticise the prevailing 'problem-centric' conception of youth held by the older generations, expressing in particular that society often propagates the notion that young people are problematic, disruptive and in need of fixing.

In other words, youth development is not currently grounded on a developmental approach. Given such a negative worldview of youths, YB Senator Chong spoke that society has failed to acknowledge the positive characteristics of Gen-Y. "It is important to enhance the competency and to expand the networks of young people," he noted. He further explained that it has been exceptionally difficult for the younger generation to thrive and to contribute more effectively in the current business environment. YB Senator Chong said that the adults have failed to provide a platform for the youth of today to prosper within the limitations set.

Senator Chong noted that there is a shift whereby a commitment to democracy and transparency is beginning to take hold. He went on to say that young people today are very well-informed. These young people have high hopes for and expectations of their leaders. Politicians can no longer mask issues or twist facts, as everything they say or do will be verified or questioned in the next instance, said Senator Chong. There has been a drastic increase in the size of the Malaysian electorate - in 2008, there were only 638,000 first-time voters. However, in 2013, the number increased to 2.6 million, representing 25% of the 13.3 million eligible voters. Leaders of this country must therefore take young people seriously, and understand their mindset, as well as their needs and desires in order to stay relevant, emphasised Senator Chong. The implication is that only politicians who genuinely serve the interests of the public will win the support of Gen Y and the younger groups, and in so doing stand the test of time. Nevertheless, Senator Chong said that democracy is a process, and one must not stop taking action. Therefore, in support of the International Youth Day theme of 'Youth Civic Empowerment', he hoped that the young people present would speak out at the round table discussions to identify strategies to build allies and advocate for causes important to nation building.

However, such an initiative cannot succeed one-way. It is impossible without a supportive and enabling environment, where freedom of speech is protected; therefore, as a policymaker, Senator Chong reaffirmed his commitment to creating an enabling and youth-friendly environment to allow young people, even young opposition politicians, and all who are passionate about nation building, to come together in a safe space to brainstorm, debate, contribute, act, and pave the road forward together. He said that when young people are empowered, they are able make informed choices freely, take action, be aware of the implications, and accept the responsibility to succeed. He also believed the primary way to achieve youth empowerment is through education and to acknowledge the weakness of the education system in terms of youth empowerment. It is crucial for policymakers to start employing a colour-blind and 'holistic approach' to education which encourages the youth to embrace others of different ethnicities. He also believed that the politicians can be a voice of peace and justice. Nonetheless, what's exciting right now is that justice, equality, and colour-blind non-racial perspectives on social issues are becoming the norm among younger people.

YB Senator Chong said that young people have high expectations about how the government should function for the public good. Hence, young people must continue to voice their ideas and to engage in spaces of democratic deliberation. Finally, he expressed his hope that all of us will never lose the hallmark qualities of youth – imagination, optimism, and idealism - despite the many challenges posed by a general 'problem-centric' worldview. He reiterated that the future belongs to young people and concluded by wishing everyone a fruitful discussion.

Panel Discussion: Issues faced by the youths of today

Moderator:

Ms. Ng Yeen Seen, Senior Director, CPPS / Chief Operations Officer, ASLI

Commentator:

Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam, Chairman, CPPS-ASLI / Group Advisor, Sunway Group

***Format:** Each of the three panel members made a short opening statement (ca. 10 minutes) about the issues faced by the Malaysian youth and the way to tackle them. Immediately afterwards, the moderator opened the floor to questions from the audience, for another 30 minutes.*

Y.B. Yeo Bee Yin, Selangor State Assemblywoman for Damansara Utama

YB Yeo began by lamenting that the Gen-Y in Malaysia are generally disinclined to join the public sector, citing that only 1 out of 4 young people whom she had met wanted to work in government. She urged young people to make a radical change by nurturing a desire to make a difference in the public governance of this country. In her view, one of the problems of young people these days is that although they are full of lofty ideals, they rarely take action to make them reality.

YB Yeo noted that the major challenges faced by young people are generally related to deficiencies in affordable housing and available public transportation that is of high efficiency. She also questioned if the Malaysian economy is creating adequate employment for young people and moreover expressed the view that young Malaysians nowadays are less equipped to take on high paying jobs.



YB Yeo concluded by saying that the young people need to contribute to the nation by “walking their talks” and to develop an action plan on this. She emphasised the fact that making a change is a process which takes patience and endurance: “As a policymaker, the truth is that it takes years to lobby and implement. Just one idea is needed, but you need to pursue it and materialise it. The issue is that you don’t want to get your hands dirty.”

Mr. Kenny Goh, Chief Executive Officer, Macro Kiosk Berhad

Mr. Goh started his intervention by reflecting upon his upbringing in what he described as a 'typical Asian household' which placed a strong emphasis on education, self-development and ethics. He highlighted the value of public education, in particular its function as a facilitator of inter-ethnic friendship and thus a bulwark against racial prejudices and stereotypes. Moreover, he agreed with Tan Sri Navaratnam's view that fundamentally today's youth are not different from that of the past: the motivations and aspirations of young people remain unchanged, and becoming an adult with responsibilities has never been easy.



Mr. Goh emphasised the civic and social duty of entrepreneurs cannot thrive if their own community isn't thriving. He mentioned that he and his two younger brothers studied in abroad, but that they all returned to Malaysia upon graduation out of a desire to contribute to the country's development. "If you can't make it in your own town, you can't make it anywhere," he said, referring to the migration of Malaysians to other countries seeking for better opportunities. He finished his participation by calling on the Malaysian youth to be entrepreneurial and take risks while pursuing their dreams, whilst stressing once again the need to give back to the community.

Mr. Ivanpal Singh Grewal, Political Secretary to YB Dato' Mah Siew Keong, Minister in the Prime Minister Department

Mr. Ivanpal mentioned that he was encouraged by YB Yeo's dynamism in encouraging young people to dream. He went on to say that young people should fully take on the responsibility of realising their dreams and inspiring others to do better. He shared that he decided to join politics at the tender age of 23.



According to Mr. Ivanpal, being young in a structured political system is very challenging. He went on to share some inspiring success stories detailing how young people managed to become ministers in some Scandinavian and other European countries. He acknowledged that Malaysians

are facing challenging times but he went on to encourage everyone not to be despair. Mr Ivanpal said that politicians need to be held accountable for their actions.

Mr. Ivanpal exhorted the young people to take the initiative to improve their skill sets to increase their chances of getting employed, notwithstanding the crucial role played by parents in ensuring the success of young people. Brain-drain is identified as one of the major problems facing Malaysia. In this vein, the recently tabled 11th Malaysia Plan (11MP) that aims at doubling the income of Malaysia must be inclusive enough for young people to contribute to the nation, said Mr Ivanpal. He went on to say that whatever grievances are being experienced by Malaysians at this particular juncture need to be openly addressed.

He concluded by asserting the importance of young people unreservedly embracing their freedom of speech and finally cited a pithy quote from Voltaire, who said “I may disagree with what you say but I will defend to the death of your right to say it.”

Questions and Answers Session

Below is a summary of the questions and answers session. Because the success of the event hinged on the preservation of a climate of trust as a precondition for a sincere and fruitful debate, we will not display the names of event participants who asked questions or presented their opinion. Only the names of panel members and CPPS/ASLI staff are shown.

Question 1: A student participant asked the panel members about the depreciation of the Malaysian Ringgit and its impact on the purchasing power of Malaysians.

Answer 2: YB Senator Chong Sin Woon said that the depreciation of the Malaysian currency with respect to the US dollar is driven by external factors and that it is best to leave the matter to the experts at Bank Negara to deal with it. He said that he understands why people are worried about the rising cost of imports and of travel abroad, but insisted that the fundamentals of the Malaysian economy are strong.

Meanwhile, Tan Sri Navaratnam said that the depreciating currency also reflected internal problems leading to a loss of confidence in the Malaysian economy –among them, the 1MDB scandal and its repercussions for the credibility of Malaysia’s government. He called the problems ‘systemic’ and insisted on the need for a comprehensive reform to the political system to limit or outright cancel the influence of private interests in politics.

Question 2: A participant from the private sector asked YB Senator Chong what he did to stand apart from other politicians and avoid the vices of politics.

Answer 2: YB Senator Chong answered that the most important part is not forgetting what his original motivation for joining politics was: to make a change, to work for a better country. He said that he was rebellious and non-conformist, but that that did not mean that he should not try and reform the system from within. He criticised the generalisations about politicians being frivolous and insisted that there are many out there who genuinely work to make Malaysia a more prosperous and just country.

Question 3: A student participant asked YB Yeo about how to be politically active in a country in which freedom of expression is limited and in which students are routinely repressed when they try to voice their inconformity.

Answer 3: YB Yeo agreed that, unfortunately, in Malaysia there are still instruments of censorship and intimidation against government critics such as the Sedition Act. Nevertheless, she said that the youth should not be afraid, because those who are scared would not make a difference. She added that change is only possible when we step out of our comfort zone and decide to take risks as “Change is inconvenient. If you’re scared, go back and live your normal life because you will not have a place in history”

Mr. Ivanpal Singh commented that due to the ethnic, religious and cultural diversity of Malaysian society, there often exists a trade-off between social harmony and freedom of expression because of the sensitivities of specific groups. He added that the government has the duty to protect those who might be offended by certain opinions or expressions, and that Malaysian society is not ready yet for full freedom of expression.

Question 4: Without addressing a specific panel member, a student participant asked whether the increasing number of Malaysians who study abroad was a concern due to the fact that many of them may not return to Malaysia.

Answer 4: Mr. Ivanpal Singh was unequivocal in that it is a problem as it represents brain drain. He explained that the relatively low wages of Malaysia are one reason that drives young people to remain abroad. However, he insisted that the government plans to create the conditions for sustained productivity growth that should, in turn, raise wages.

Question 5: A student participant criticised the reliance of Malaysian public education on rote learning and asked whether the quality of the public education system was jeopardising the youth’s chances of developing their full intellectual, academic and professional potential.

Answer 5: YB Yeo said that Malaysia's education system is becoming worse, citing the poor results of the country in the latest PISA¹ and the fact that much poorer neighbouring countries, such as Vietnam, performed much better. She agreed that the teaching methods are outmoded because of their heavy reliance on rote learning rather than on the development of critical thinking skills.

Mr. Ivanpal agreed that there are problems in the Malaysian public education system, which he characterised as being 'too top down'. He spoke of the need for what he called the 'democratisation of schools'. In his view, schools have sufficient resources and teachers are well paid by international standards, but the teaching methods need to be reformed to adjust to the 21st century.

Mr. Goh explained that he is a product of the public education system and that any child can thrive in the system as long as he puts enough effort into his learning process and as long as he has the support of his parents.

Question 6: A student participant observed that while the debate about the Malaysian youth focuses on the needs of the majority, the needs of minorities who are unable to fit into the system are rarely mentioned. She asked what is being done to accommodate ethnic minorities or handicapped people so that they too can enjoy a rich and fulfilling life.



Answer 6: YB Yeo replied that her party (DAP) had indeed implemented some measures to support vulnerable populations in the states in which it rules (such as free public transport or food banks).

Mr. Ivanpal added that the national government is also working in favour of marginalised groups and that it is a moral responsibility of all Malaysians to look after the most vulnerable members of society.

¹ Programme for International Student Assessment, or PISA, is a standardised test to assess the problem-solving skills of 15 year-olds. It takes place every 3 years in over 70 countries across the world. The last one was in 2012. It is organised by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Focus groups: Empowering and enabling the youth

Activity description: From 11 am to 4 pm (with a lunch break from 1 to 2 pm), participants were divided into three groups in order to attend workshops on six key topics for Malaysia's youth. The workshops were carried out under the focus group format, in which participants voice their opinions, ideas and concerns regarding specific challenges and the ways in which they can be addressed. The workshops were facilitated by experts and supported by CPPS staff.

Each workshop lasted 20-30 minutes, at the end of which the groups would rotate to the next workshop. This means that by the end of the activity all event participants had taken part in all six workshops. After end of the first workshop session (11am to 1pm), the three facilitators presented a summary of the discussion results and answered questions from the rest of the audience. The same procedure took place after the second workshop session (2 to 4pm).

Below is a list of the workshop topics and the name and position of their facilitator.

Focus group workshop	Facilitator
1. Work Competitiveness	Mr. Kenny Goh, Chief Executive Officer, Macro Kiosk Berhad
2. Human Rights and Advocacy	Y.B. Yeo Bee Yin, Selangor State Assemblywoman for Damansara Utama
3. Good Governance, Integrity and Political Participation	Mr. Ivanpal Singh Grewal, Political Secretary to YB Dato' Mah Siew Keong, Minister in the Prime Minister Department
4. Social Inequality	Mr. Gan Ping Sieu, Co-Chairman, Centre for a Better Tomorrow (CENBET)
5. Education	Mr. Ivanpal Singh Grewal, Political Secretary to YB Dato' Mah Siew Keong, Minister in the Prime Minister Department
6. National Unity	Mr. Lim Teck Hoe, Chief Executive Officer, ideaspark

Summary of the results of workshops

The main ideas, points of view, concerns and questions expressed during the focus group workshops are shown below. Due to space limitations, only the most relevant participations (i.e. those that triggered an exchange of points of view or that were indicative of a consensus or unanimous point of view) are presented in this section².

1. Work Competitiveness

Facilitator: Mr. Kenny Goh, Chief Executive Officer, Macro Kiosk Berhad

1.1 *Current situation, problems and challenges*

Skill mismatches in a highly competitive labour market

- On one hand, Malaysians are becoming better educated, so that attractive job positions are coveted by an ever-larger number of candidates; on the other, the Malaysian economy is changing (becoming more knowledge-oriented and more intensive on critical thinking and creativity) in ways that are not mirrored by the education system. The first phenomenon leads to a highly competitive labour market, the second one to skill mismatches between what firms seek and what employees can offer.



The first phenomenon leads to a highly competitive labour market, the second one to skill mismatches between what firms seek and what employees can offer.

1.2 *Next steps and policy recommendations*

Raising the quality of graduates: University and school curricula need to evolve in order to reflect the needs of a 21st world economy. Digital skills, critical thinking skills, creativity and soft skills (intercultural communication, eloquence, team-building, etc.) are now crucial skills that firms need. Likewise, firms that want to train their staff need more support for the government in order to share the costs.

² Please note that the ideas presented correspond only to those voiced by the participants to the event. Although the participants to the event were diverse in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, education and profession, they are not necessarily a representative sample of Malaysian society. This means that their views cannot be said to represent those of young Malaysians as a whole.

Avoid skills mismatches: Closer coordination between the private sector and universities/technical colleges could lead to the reduction in the gap between how students are educated and what firms need from them. Moreover, there should be more information available for young people about the trades or professions in high demand, so that they can factor it into their career choice.

2. Human rights and Advocacy

Facilitator: YB Yeo Bee Yin, Selangor State Assemblywoman for Damansara Utama

2.1 *Current situation, problems and challenges*

Human Rights: Malaysian society is still not fully aware of the fact that the country has a human rights problem because of censorship, repression and other limitations on basic individual liberties. There is limited or no Human Rights education. The issues of minorities, for instance the oppressive climate that hangs over the LGBT community, are systematically neglected by both government and society.



Repression and censorship: A common concern about participants is what YB Yeo termed the “Culture of Fear” that prevents people from speaking up when they notice something wrong in their community or in the country as a whole. Self-censorship, she said, is so widespread as to be perceived as normal. She reminded the audience that activism – speaking out against the status quo - is indeed risky, but those who are not willing to take risks will not be part of the country’s solution.

2.2 *Next steps and policy recommendations*

Human Rights, Censorship and Repression: A key prerequisite to progress in human rights is to achieve a real separation of the judiciary and executive branches of government. She called attention to the continuous political use of the judiciary and warned that no country can guarantee the rights of its citizens when politicians can turn the justice system against their foes on a whim.

Ratification of international treaties on human rights - Malaysia has to live up to its duties as a member of the international community by signing up United Nations' conventions on Human Rights and on Racial Discrimination, which would then force the government to effect changes on the national level. However, civil society needs to become much stronger in order to push for real change. Government needs to recognise that a vibrant, plural democracy needs a strong organised civil sector that holds government to account but also puts forth solutions to societal problems. A way for the government to support the development of civil society would be to increase funding for NGOs.

3. Good governance, Integrity and Political Participation

Facilitator: Mr. Ivanpal Singh Grewal, Political Secretary to YB Dato' Mah Siew Keong, Minister in the Prime Minister Department

3.1 *Current situation, problems and challenges*

Lack of separation between powers – The perception within the focus groups was that the Executive dominates over the Legislative and especially over the Judiciary. This runs contrary to the notion of a parliamentary democracy in which Executive power is checked by the other powers. Moreover, there are institutions which are currently under the umbrella of the Executive but which need to be independent and autonomous in order to be effective, such as the MACC and the Elections Commission.

Youth participation and repression: While in some ways youth participation is politics is a reality, the perception is that there is still much apathy among younger generations combined with fear of repression or censorship by the government (through the Sedition Act, for instance). The fact that university students cannot join political organisations (a standard practice in almost all democratic countries but illegal in Malaysia as per Article 15 of the Universities and University Colleges Act, UUCA) is seen as a major hindrance to political participation by the youth, and one that violates their political rights. The same can be said of the restriction on political affiliation that applies to all Malaysian scholarship-holders, who often represent the best and most talented members of their cohort and who cannot become active in politics.



3.2 *Next steps and policy recommendations*

Political participation and representation: The structural solutions have to do with recognising and protecting the civic and political rights of the Malaysian youth so that they can affiliate themselves with political organisations – or indeed create new ones - without being persecuted. Moreover, it was agreed that more efforts should be undertaken to educate Malaysians about their political and legal system and that initiatives like MyConsti need to be supported and expanded.

Good governance: The consensus was that more checks and balances on executive power are necessary tackle the problem of insufficient separation of powers. Guaranteeing the autonomy of key institutions such as the MACC or the Elections Commission was also mentioned. Comprehensive reform of the political system to make political competition free and fair was seen as key toward recovering the credibility of the system in the eyes of the population.

4. **Social inequality**

Facilitator: Mr. Gan Ping Sieu, Co-Chairman, Centre for a Better Tomorrow (CENBET)

4.1 *Current situation, problems and challenges*

General assessment: Social inequality is perceived to be high and increasing. Participants shared the impression that this problem is given low priority in national politics. The general view is that inequality is a widely accepted phenomenon, which makes it difficult to undertake efforts to address the problem.



Ethnic dimension: Much of the discussion on inequality overlaps with the one about national unity because there is a strong ethnic component to inequality. The consensus of the group is that the racial divisions and tensions that characterise Malaysian society contribute to inequality because to a significant extent an individual's opportunities are determined by the group he belongs to. Stereotypes perpetuate this problem.

Other dimensions: Inequality has many other dimensions: countryside versus cities, well-educated versus poorly educated, and private versus public schools.

Social goal: In general, it is agreed that everyone should have the same opportunities to live a prosperous life and to maximise his or her potential, and that the education system is crucial in order to make equality of opportunity a reality.

4.2 Next steps and policy recommendations

Participation: The first step is to raise the visibility of the issue in the public agenda through civic participation. Civil society organisations and individuals should seek dialogue with high-ranking civil servants.

Human Rights: Ratifying the Human Rights Charter and incorporating Human Rights into Malaysian legislation would ensure greater equality of standard of living across the nation.

5. Education

Facilitator: Mr. Ivanpal Singh Grewal, Political Secretary to YB Dato' Mah Siew Keong, Minister in the Prime Minister Department

5.1 Current situation, problems and challenges

Low overall quality of the education system – As the latest results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) show, Malaysian 15 year-olds are seriously deficient in problem-solving skills and critical thinking. A major perceived weakness of the Malaysian education system is its reliance on rote learning, which is contrary to the development of higher-order thinking skills. As for higher education, university rankings show that Malaysian universities are far from world-class.



Segregation and skill disparity – The adoption of Bahasa Malaysia as the main language of instruction has led to a high degree of ethnic segregation in the education system, which in turn has created large knowledge and skill gaps among students of different ethnic groups. Non-Malay students see little incentive in attending Sekolah Kebangsaan and are instead educated in vernacular schools, in their native Chinese or Tamil. The switch from English to Bahasa Malaysia is thus seen as a decision that eroded national unity.

Inequality in access to higher education – The racial quotas for university admissions create inequality and are not seen as acceptable because they contradict the principle of meritocracy.

Insufficient funding for local schools – It is perceived that some schools, particularly in rural areas, lack sufficient funding for computers, libraries and learning materials.

Inadequate curriculum at Chinese vernacular schools – Some participants complained about the highly stringent and demanding curriculum at Chinese vernacular schools and related them to the high drop-out grades of students who attend them.

Arts and technical/vocational programs are stigmatised – Participants agreed that many students do not choose arts or technical/educational study programs because they fear that society will not appreciate their skills.

5.2 *Next steps and policy recommendations*

Reintroduce English as the main language of instruction at public schools – This policy would achieve three goals at once. Firstly, it would strengthen national unity by promoting a multi-ethnic education in which people are not segregated by native language. Secondly, it would boost the quality of education by enabling teachers and schools to introduce scientific materials in English into the syllabus. And thirdly, it would make Malaysia more competitive by educating generations of fluent English-speakers. Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese and Tamil could then be taught in schools as second languages.

Remove racial quotas for universities – Race should not play a role in university admissions. All Malaysians students should have a level playing field. Merit alone should determine who receives a place at a university.

Remove the stigma associated to the arts and technical/vocational education – The government should run campaigns to make the public aware of the virtues of these disciplines.

6. National Unity

Facilitator: Mr. Lim Teck Hoe, Chief Executive Officer, ideaspark

6.1 *Current situation, problems and challenges*

The workshop participants did not believe that Malaysians are united. Ethnicity, religion, language and culture are very strong identity markers that have not been counterbalanced by a unified and coherent national identity. Moreover, society is rife with racism and racial stereotypes. That is why national unity has not been achieved even 58 years after independence, in the participants' opinion.



Social dimension: Malaysians are segregated by religion and race from an early age, attend different schools and have friends who are like them. Parents aggravate the problem by transmitting prejudices about other races to their children. Inter-racial and inter-faith tensions seem to be generally less strong in East Malaysia in comparison with the Peninsula.

Institutional dimension: Most participants agreed that the main causes of the lack of unity are institutional. Pro-Bumiputera discriminatory policies in education, business and social policy, combined the increasing encroachment of Islam in many areas of public life, are examples of policies that divide instead of uniting Malaysians. A further source of disunity was the presence of extremist groups –particularly Malay ethno-nationalists- whose agenda consists of spreading hatred against other groups. Participants agreed that the government has not proceeded seriously against these groups due to political reasons.

6.2 *Next steps and policy recommendations*

On the individual level: It was agreed that each of us should stop using racial stereotypes and instead promote friendships with members of other creeds or communities. Elements that unite Malaysians should be emphasised, such as food or sports, whereas elements that divide Malaysians (such as religion) should be confined to private life.

On the institutional level: The consensus was that Malaysia needs to stop practising institutional racism. For national unity to be possible, Malaysians need to be all equal in terms of their opportunities and access to education, jobs, financing and business. The idea that Malaysia needs an Ethnic Harmony Act was criticised because it might end up creating more censorship and repression (under the veil of protecting people from being offended by others).

Another institutional way to promote national unity that was widely supported was the creation of single-stream education system based on English, like it used to be. It was agreed that education is the great integrating mechanism of society and that kids should learn and play with one another without thinking about which ethnic group they belong to. Moreover, it was agreed that Singapore could be a good example for Malaysia of how education can create a single national identity in multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural country.

Commentary on workshop findings

With the results of the six workshops in mind, three experts (one from government, one from civil society and one from an international organisation) made brief statements on the general results of the workshops as well as on the issues facing the Malaysian youth. Afterwards, the floor was opened to questions from all event participants.

Mr. Ivanpal Singh Grewal, Political Secretary to YB Dato' Mah Siew Keong, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department

Mr. Ivanpal began by thanking all the events participants for their contribution to a fruitful discussion. He then focused on the topic of good governance and the expectations gap between what Malaysians expect from their government and what the government can deliver. He said that, although many governmental plans and policies were in line with the needs of the country, often implementation was spotty due to a lack of coordination between and within government agencies, compounded by the lack of resources.

The next topic he addressed was corruption. He insisted that integrity in government is increasing, citing as an example the fact that nowadays almost every project is tendered in a transparent and fair way. However, he cautioned, the problem of corruption is one of supply and demand and

society must also do its part. In his view, corruption is sometimes advocated by venal businessmen seeking to cut corners. The entire country must be committed to fight corruption. He also cited the strides of the MACC in leading this effort.

Finally, Mr. Ivanpal touched upon the subject of wages, linking it to the issue of productivity. The former cannot rise if the latter is stagnant, he said. A better educated society is also a more productive society and thus one in which wages rise. He highlighted the fact that the new Education Blueprint incorporated an ambitious, modern vision of education and said that he trusted that it would transform education.

Mr. Gan Ping Sieu, Co-Chairman, Centre for a Better Tomorrow (CENBET)

Mr. Gan began by commenting on the issue of corruption in government. He talked about the potential of technology as a means of reducing the scope for corruption. Discretion and opacity, he said, are what enables people to engage in corrupt dealings. Technology simplifies processes and makes them automatic, reducing red tape but also corruption. He also supported Mr. Ivanpal's view that corruption must be understood as a problem of supply and demand, and that society needs to be willing to do its effort because it is the demand side (and as long as there is demand, there will be also a supply).



He then referred to the findings of the workshop on National Unity as well as those of the Education one. One conclusion of both workshops was that a single-stream education system, with English as the primary language of instruction, would enhance both National Unity (by eroding racial stereotypes, facilitating inter-ethnic friendship and cementing a common national identity based on shared experience) as well as Education and Competitiveness (due to the undisputed role of English as the language of Science, Business and global affairs).

Even though among event participants support for this idea was overwhelming (close to 80%), he cautioned that the sample of people present was not representative of Malaysian society as a whole. Nationwide, he said, a vast majority of Malays as well as many Chinese would vehemently oppose such measure. He guessed that for the general population the level of support is the inverse of that at the event (i.e. 80% opposing single-stream education). He urged event participants to consider this diversity of views as well as dialogue spaces to exchange ideas with those who prefer a segregated (multi-stream) education system.

Wivina Belmonte, Country Representative of the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in Malaysia

Ms. Belmonte started her intervention by stressing how impressed she was to see a large group of young people coming together to discuss policymaking. She shared a conversation she had recently had with the Foreign Minister, in which the latter asked her, “What’s the hardest thing you have ever done in UNICEF?” to which she replied, “Taking the problems of children, adolescence and the youth, which are very soft issues, and turning them into hard political issues.”

She then spoke of the main problem of policymaking being that it is primarily influenced by vested self-interests. She also observed that the youth want to reap the fruits of the economy, and the government and private sector need to listen to them since they make up 30% of the population. Besides that, she noted how the debate in the room was focused on Malaysia solely, leaving out the regional and international context (i.e the Asean Economic Community).



On the issue of discourse on national unity, she said that in Belgium, where she was born, and in Canada, where she lived, national unity is often talked about. Then, she said that although her ‘cynical’ (sic) self tends to dismiss that topic as meaningless, she has learned to recognise the importance of national unity as a force for good. She noted that these discussions make up a continuous shift from what divides to what unites. As an example she cited the climate of national unity that she perceived in Malaysia during the London 2012 Olympics.

As a way of conclusion, she remarked, “The challenge is to make our voices matter, to use it, to make change from it through a political party, NGO, or company. Use your voice. Malaysia Boleh!”

Summary and conclusion of RTD proceedings

To commemorate the 2015 International Youth Day theme entitled 'Youth Civic Engagement' and to promote young people's effective and inclusive civic engagement at all levels, CPPS is glad to have had the opportunity to organise an event in which young people and young leaders voiced and discussed their concerns, ideas and solutions for the issues afflicting their generation and the country as a whole. The results of the event reflect the priorities of many young people. Among the issues that emerged as very relevant for young Malaysians were:

- a) Recognising that young people have the enterprise, resilience and optimism to contribute to the prosperity of Malaysia. By focusing on young people's strengths, we can be empowered and thrive. We should remove barriers to the participation of youths in politics: rather than organising youth parliaments, let's make the youth part of Parliament.
- b) Young people's aspirations and expectations in terms of well-being and social belonging are perceived to be threatened by factors such as low wages, insufficient skills (un-employability), rising cost of living, unaffordable housing options. At the same time, they are afraid to speak out because of censorship, repression and other constraints on freedom and civic rights. Provisions within legal devices such as the Sedition Act, the Prevention of Terrorism Act and the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) allow the government to intimidate, detain or even prosecute young people for becoming politically engaged.
- c) The participants believe that the discrimination involved in paying younger people less than older people – regardless of skill - is unacceptable. They called on employers and government to uphold meritocracy and reward effort, talent and skill over age. Meritocracy should also be the defining element in university admissions.
- d) Public transport emerged as an issue that significantly affects the quality of living of young people in cities, and one which can also affect their capacity to access education and look for jobs. Therefore, participants called on government to increase the frequency, reliability, quality and affordability of public transport.
- e) The rate of youth unemployment is high and young people need better education, skill development and apprenticeships to help equip them with the right tools to enter the employment market.
- f) A key concern for the development of democracy and the protection of freedoms and Human Rights was the insufficient separation of powers and the ability of the executive to

manipulate the judiciary. The judiciary needs to be truly independent and have the capacity to act against the other branches of the State, including the Executive Branch.

- g) In the context of the 1MDB crisis, delegates agreed on the need for a reform to the political system and in particular to the rules for political financing. Transparency, accountability and strict controls on the size and origin of political donations are fundamental to ensure the viability of the Malaysian democracy.
- h) Good governance needs to become more than just empty words. The principles of good governance should be taken seriously by the Malaysian government. The results of the event show that some principles of good governance are perceived as being weak in Malaysia:
- Citizen-centric design of government: The entire government's only reason to exist is to serve the people, and hence governments must be judged in terms of how they contribute to improving the lives of citizens. Government should not forget what it stands for.
 - Accountability: In congruence with the previous point, governments need to understand that they are obliged to respond to citizens' enquiries and to justify their actions fully. A democratic government is accountable to the people who elected it because citizens are the ones in charge – they are sovereign. They set up a government to promote the public interest; therefore the government is answerable to the people.
 - Civil society as a counter-weight to government: No democracy can function effectively if civil society is not properly organised to keep the government in check. The development of civil society goes hand in hand with the development of democracy. For this reason, adequate support needs to be given to NGOs to enable them to operate as the 4th branch of the State (besides the executive, the judiciary and the legislative).
- i) In terms of Human Rights, these have to be properly acknowledged and reaffirmed by both government and society. Malaysia has to commit itself to protecting Human Rights if it wants to be recognised as an advanced country at the forefront of civilisation. For this purpose, educating the Malaysian people about Human Rights as inherent and inalienable guarantees protecting all humans is crucial. Similarly, it is urgent that Malaysia subscribes the UN's treaties on Human Rights and Racial Discrimination. Particularly worrying is the neglect (or outright denial) of the rights of minorities, such as the LGBT community and

migrants. Empirical work is needed to better understand the origins and magnitude of the problem of Human Rights violations in Malaysia.

- j) Education is the greatest equaliser. So long as access to quality education remains unequal, Malaysia won't achieve the goal of being a society in which everyone has the same opportunities to succeed in life. Education goes beyond the idea of schooling: people need to learn to learn, so that they can improve and develop themselves throughout their lives.
- k) Social inequalities remain a key barrier for Malaysia to become a developed nation. These inequalities are manifested in urban-rural divides, gender inequalities, and class divides. One strategic approach advanced to leverage the role of young people in addressing social inequalities is to promote the participation of young people in local government. This is, however, a two-sided issue: young people also need to be more proactive in positioning themselves in local government levels to make a difference. Adequate consultative and participatory initiatives are also needed to further address social-inequality at the local level by identifying the root causes – it is not only a matter of national politics but also a local one.
- l) National Unity remains a weak spot of Malaysia. There is a strong perception among the youth that, for all the official talk on National Unity, there are many laws and policies that in fact make provoke disunity because they exacerbate racial and cultural fault lines. In other words, the institutionalised racism practised by the government undermines efforts to achieve a harmonious, cohesive society with a unified national identity. An example of the above is pro-Bumiputera discrimination. Many participants observed that non-Bumiputera Malaysians even migrate abroad because they perceive their country as being skewed against them. These are often among Malaysia's best and brightest young people. However, there was also agreement that inter-ethnic divisions are stronger on the Peninsula than in Sabah and Sarawak.

Closing remarks

Ms. Ng began her closing remarks by thanking all participants for being there the whole day and also for their enthusiasm, energy, ideas and commitment. She celebrated the fact that the event had sparked many fruitful discussions on topics that are so crucial for Malaysia's future and thus for the lives of all young people. She also reminded her audience of the fact that the analyses, perspectives, ideas and policy recommendations that had been voiced at the event would be incorporated into the report (this document), which CPPS-ASLI would then be share with policymakers, Members of Parliament and wider society. Even though there was no guarantee that the ideas would be implemented, they would become part of the political debate, she said.

In Ms. Ng's view, the discussions had been characterised not only by dissatisfaction and frustration with many issues, but also by hope and optimism because young people know that change is possible. More crucially, she emphasised the drive and motivation of young people to be part of that change. In spite of all accusations of Generation Y being apathetic, she remarked that throughout the day she



had observed the opposite: that young people were well-informed about the challenges of their country and more than willing to discuss them and to put forth ideas to solve them.

Finally, Ms. Ng asked her young audience to remain mindful of two facts: firstly, not to forget that they represent a group of talented, highly-educated Malaysians and that therefore they should not mistake their views for those of all young Malaysians; secondly, that no matter how interesting and fruitful discussion events can be, they are no substitute for actual engagement and participation in the shaping of the country. "Don't be an armchair critic," she warned, and invited young people to continue the discussion on other forums and to go out of their comfort zone to effect change. She promised that there would be further CPPS events focused on the youth and invited them to come back next year full of experiences to continue to enrich the discussion. After thanking everyone once again, she declared the end of the session.