

Beyond thumos: Debating and listening in a crisis

Public policymaking in a crisis is never easy. There is a need to balance consultation and debate and the urgency of the task at hand.



Simon Tay

For the Straits Times

Singapore is on heightened alert as efforts are stepped up to rein in the recent spike in Covid-19 cases. We're on a knife-edge, as Finance Minister Lawrence Wong, co-chair of the multi-ministry task force on the pandemic, put it. Along with concern over rising case numbers, there has also been a measure of frustration and anger at our current state of revived restrictions.

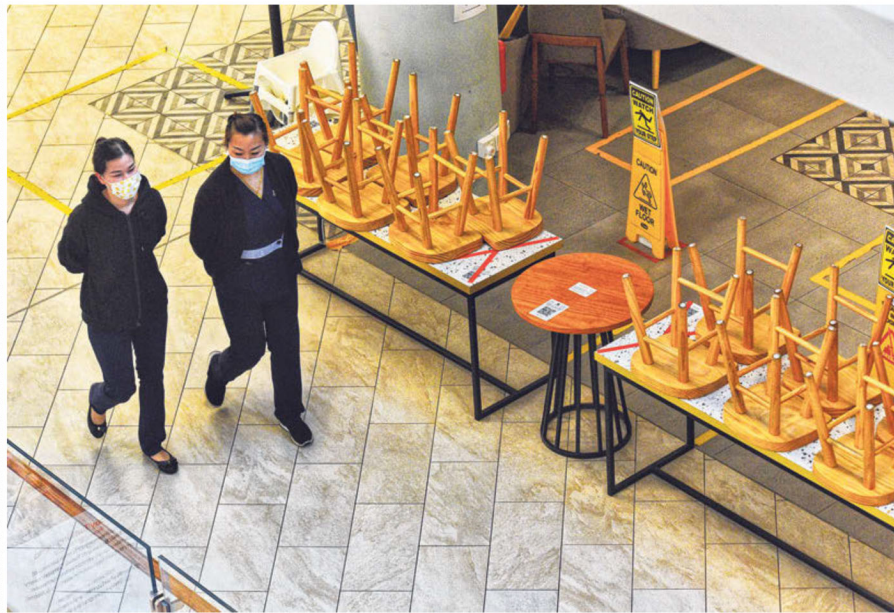
It is hard to gauge how broad or deep the level of disappointment and anger is on the ground over the Government's handling of the matter. Depending on one's circle of friends and acquaintances and social media feeds, it could be the venting of views of a relatively small but loud constituency, or the signs of a larger wave of discontent.

Former editor of *The Straits Times*, Mr Leslie Fong, gave voice to some of the concerns in his commentary on May 20, "What lies beneath the unhappiness over Covid resurgence in S'pore?", arguing that "it would be a mistake to dismiss the dissatisfaction uttered thus far as just 'noise' in the ether or the opportunistic cavilling of those who have an axe to grind".

He also ties this to the Greek concept of "thumos" that people have a right to speak up strongly if they feel their views have been unfairly dismissed. Indeed, Mr Fong says that while thumos – the inner force that drives such overt expressions – can have negative aspects, it can make a positive contribution for citizens to inveigh against what the Government does or does not do. Maybe.

THUMOS IN CONTEXT

Listening to citizens should normally be the rule for a democracy or indeed any society



An eatery at PLQ Mall on Sunday, during phase two (heightened alert) when no dining is allowed. In this pandemic, when the fight against the virus is made harder by the fast-paced churn of information and misinformation, there must be limits to public consultations and listening, says the writer. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

in which individuals matter. Yet what about public discourse in a time of crisis, a war, or a pandemic? Might there necessarily be different rules and some circumscription?

For those who enjoy Greek analogies, consider thumos in context. Ancient Greece was a direct democracy in which all citizens discussed and voted on important issues – meeting up to 40 times a year as a forum. As such, thumos was one key to ensure active and thoughtful participation from citizens.

This is no longer possible today. Athens was one of the ancient world's largest city-states but it was tiny by modern standards. What's more, studies suggest that only about 10 per cent to 20 per cent of Athenians participated in these forums.

Today, delegated democracies are the norm, not direct democracies. Elections are held for Members of Parliament to represent people and for executive government to take charge of much larger and complex decision-making processes.

Feedback, of course, continues to be important. But there are

limits, especially in times of urgency.

This was true even in ancient Greece. A leader like Pericles would serve as general when exigencies necessitated. The assembly of loud and often long debates would be emptied out. Instead the leader would consult a smaller body, the *boule*, on decisions and priorities in times of crisis and war.

In this pandemic, when the fight against the virus has been made much harder by a fast-paced and relentless churn of information and misinformation, there must be limits to the consultations and listening. Otherwise taking action would be impossible, with second-guessing and judgment in the rear-view mirror.

Our society would do well to avoid civil strife – or if you like another Greek word, "stasis" – the constant bickering and divisive debate that chips away at social cohesion and drains the will to take action. One reason we talk about ancient Athens today rather than so many other Greek democracies is that the others were cleaved by stasis and failed.

Yet this does not mean that the

government of the day has a blank cheque. Debating and also listening amid a crisis are possible and remain necessary. But it is no easy task finding a path between one extreme of cacophonous dissension and paralysis, and another of the hazards of group-think and self-imposed deafness; it's akin to the Greek hero Odysseus having to navigate between the mythical sea monsters, Scylla and Charybdis – hard choices have to be made in a situation that entails sacrifices either way.

PRIVATE DEBATE AND PUBLIC LISTENING

How can the Government best discern sentiments – beyond those who shout loudest on social media? How do decision-makers act on the feedback when complex issues may not allow for populist responses but instead require tough calls? How best can leaders communicate decisions taken and share the reasons?

These are difficult questions in a crisis and there are no silver-bullet solutions. Much depends on the system of governance and the

pre-existing social expectations and trust. But there are some things that could be considered, going forward, to ensure robust debate continues among decision-makers as well as to improve two-way public communication.

One possible mechanism draws from a practice that Israel adopted after an intelligence failure in the run-up to the 1973 Yom Kippur War, called the Tenth Man. When nine agree, the 10th man is obliged to robustly challenge them, and thus avoid group-think and identify blind spots. Playing devil's advocate, the 10th man speaks confidentially rather than in public. Keeping debates in-house assists when decisions are often highly complex and depend on sensitive information.

For public communication, efforts to gather feedback and assess sentiment can be stepped up.

Yes, the multi-ministry task force has been consistent and clear in communicating what the Government will do. We must also acknowledge that in the present circumstances, gathering feedback cannot be as complete as efforts such as the Our Singapore

Conversation dialogues.

Yet despite fewer resources and higher demands on time, new channels can help the Government communicate empathy and provide reassurance in this time of heightened concern.

An additional conduit could be tasked to specifically gather feedback from different segments of society. Roundtables could be held selectively with different groups and surveys undertaken. This would assist clearer, more quantitative analyses rather than responding to the loudest voices, anecdotes and echo chambers on social media.

A quieter majority may not speak up in the spirit of thumos, but might still welcome greater assurance that their concerns are heard and considered, even if hard decisions need to be taken. As the current measures stabilise, our leaders should again communicate the big picture. Singapore has chosen not to close its borders, unlike Australia, New Zealand and Taiwan, all of which have closed-border policies guided by what some call a "moat mentality". For me, I support openness but the choice and the reasons for it bear reiteration when new infections come in through our airport and other points of contact with the outside world.

Beyond specific operational protocols now in place, the risks taken need to be communicated. The overall vision of keeping Singapore open – safely, securely and rationally – is one that more Singaporeans need to understand and, hopefully, support.

GOING FORWARD TOGETHER

It is not clear how broadly the thumos sentiment runs today. Perhaps the unhappiness and anger could prove a blip if current measures are successful in containing the Covid-19 spread. Perhaps many others, less restive and loud, know they have coped with the circuit breaker before and will endure – even if they are concerned and disappointed by the setbacks. Still, a significant section of the population could find greater government efforts to explain and to listen a welcome move.

What looks certain is that the fight against the pandemic will be a long one, with many ups and downs. Consider cities like Melbourne, where residents endured three lockdowns despite an overall good record. Recall in Singapore the outbreak in foreign worker dormitories that sent our national numbers soaring for months before great effort brought the situation under control.

The current situation, too, can be stabilised. To be sure, the path ahead will not be easy. An African proverb says that if you wish to go fast, travel alone. On a longer journey, as this pandemic is proving to be, the wisdom is that it is best to go forward together.

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