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How NSmen could be Rewarded

By Ho Shu Huang

Synopsis

The National Service Recognition Award (NSRA) was recently launched to recognise National Servicemen (NSmen) for their contributions to Singapore's security. Although well-intentioned, the NSRA runs the risk of being only appreciated for its cash value. The government might therefore consider establishing a coherent philosophy of appreciating NSmen that goes beyond the simple principle that they should be recognised.

Commentary

THE NATIONAL Service Recognition Award (NSRA) was recently launched to thank National Servicemen (NSmen) for their contributions to Singapore's security. NSmen eligible for the award will receive at least \$9000 in three equal tranches. It is the largest monetary award for NSmen thus far, and will cost the government millions of dollars each year to disburse.

Although well-intentioned, the NSRA runs the risk of being only appreciated for its cash value. As an award and not a subsidy, effort must be invested in ensuring Singaporeans understand what it symbolises. To that end, the Singapore government might consider establishing a coherent philosophy of appreciating NSmen that goes beyond the simple principle that they should be recognised.

Developing a Coherent Philosophy

The government's decision to introduce the NSRA is the latest of a series of initiatives consistently introduced to thank NSmen for their contributions to Singapore's security. The government has from the very start deeply appreciated the sacrifices NSmen. Goh Keng Swee, Singapore's first defence minister, often acknowledged this, and the topic has been regularly discussed in parliamentary sessions. For the past two decades, Recognising the Contributions of Operationally Ready National Servicemen to Total Defence (RECORD) committees have brainstormed and suggested ways to better appreciate Singapore's NSmen. Many of their suggestions have been adopted.

Unfortunately, the good intentions behind the NSRA have been overshadowed by debates, especially in cyberspace, surrounding the monetary value of the award. While the vast majority of NSmen appreciate the government's gesture, some debate whether the \$9000 quantum is sufficient. Others bemoan the amount goes straight into their Post Secondary Education Account (PSEA) and Central Provident Fund Account, limiting the award's use. A cynical few wonder if they can pay the government a larger sum to avoid National Service altogether. These murmurings suggest that for some, the forest has already been missed for the trees.

These reactions are not unexpected. Monetary incentives invariably invite scrutiny. Yet, as Mr. Michael Palmer, Chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee - Defence and Foreign Affairs (GPC-DFA), pointed out, the “best awards are probably monetary incentives”. Monetary incentives are tangible, transparent, equitable, and are comparatively easy to administer, important characteristics of any good government policy. Furthermore, Singaporeans are largely pragmatic and look at the practical utility of any benefit received. Attaching a cash value to the NSRA packages it in a way that Singaporeans understand.

Giving More Visibility

The disadvantage of disbursing monetary incentives is the symbolic value of such awards is typically under-emphasised. Instead, its “usability,” or monetary benefit, is invariably highlighted by the recipient. The government has taken great pains to emphasise the NSRA is not compensation for an NSman’s sacrifice, but a token of appreciation. Yet, with “\$9000” associated with the award, it is now hard to look beyond that figure.

One reason for this difficulty is the lack of coherence in the various initiatives which recognise NSmen. There currently is no umbrella movement that overtly, regularly and clearly thanks NSmen for their contributions. While the RECORD committee does an admirable job, its visibility to the general public is limited, often to only when it releases its recommendations. Furthermore, its stated primary goal is functional (to suggest specific ways how NSmen can be supported and recognised,) not philosophical (to guide and inform such initiatives.) Each initiative to recognise NSmen is generally announced independently without any overarching framework beyond one that simply acknowledges NSmen should be appreciated for their sacrifices. Consequently, each award is analysed by NSmen on its own practical terms, and not within the rubric of something larger.

A Singaporean “Military Covenant”?

Recognising NSmen must go beyond repeating the self-evident fact that they make sacrifices by doing National Service. As the award is meant to recognise military professionals, even if they are citizen soldiers, the disbursement of any award must be done within a philosophy that emphasises the martial values of community, comradeship and respectful reciprocity between the Nation and the Soldier grounded in honour and sacrifice.

One example of such a philosophy is the British Army’s “Military Covenant” which was formalised in 2000. It is explained as “the mutual obligation between the Nation, the Army and each individual soldier; an unbreakable common bond of identity, loyalty and responsibility ... Soldiers will be called upon to make personal sacrifices in the service of the Nation. In putting the needs of the Nation and the Army before their own, they forego some of the rights enjoyed by those outside the Armed Forces. In return, British soldiers must always be able to expect fair treatment, to be valued and respected as individuals, and that they ... will be sustained and rewarded by commensurate terms and conditions of service.”

The value of such a social contract lies less in the specific benefits servicemen receive in recognition for their service, but the promise that “the Nation” will take care of them. The government need not set up Veterans’ hospitals as is the case in the United Kingdom (though it might be useful to examine such ideas) but it could publicly adopt a similar philosophy to guide its recognition of NSmen. Rather than have several large one-off monetary incentives, or adjusting NSmen allowances upwards, which are typically forgotten soon after, the government could also introduce smaller measures which demonstrate that it is continuously fulfilling its side of its “mutual obligation” to care for NSmen. These might include subsidised healthcare and public transport concessions for all NSmen.

Constant reminder

The point is not the actual value of such awards, but that such discounts will be omnipresent privileges which only NSmen are entitled to, and thereby serve as a constant reminder that the government, and Singaporeans writ large, care about them. A Singaporean “Military Covenant” could be an example of “creative thinking” which Ms. Li Xueying, in an earlier *Straits Times* op-ed, called for “which might make people feel good about being citizens”. “The money,” she highlighted, “is not the point.” That Singapore fundamentally appreciates its NSmen, is. Having a coherent, overarching structure to guide NSmen recognition will certainly drive this home and make that an integral part of Singapore’s social consciousness.

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