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— Mrs Lim Hwee Hua

# Govt not like a tap you can turn on & off

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**Two years after leaving politics, Singapore's first woman minister Lim Hwee Hua launched a book titled "Government in Business — Friend or Foe?" yesterday.**

In conjunction with the book launch, Mrs Lim, 54, gave her take as one of the four panellists at a seminar organised by the Centre for Governance, Institutions & Organisations, NUS Business School and Straits Times Press.

## **1 WHY IS THE GOVERNMENT'S ROLE IN BUSINESSES SO TOPICAL?**

I think the reason this is so topical and often very controversial is the existence of what I call an expectation gap of Government's involvement in business, particularly when it's a shareholder.

So what happens is the public may expect the Government to calibrate its involvement — when it's needed, to be there; and when it's not needed, to get out pronto.

Unfortunately, the Government is not designed to act that way or as quickly. It's not like a tap that you can just turn on and off.

Once Government is perceived to be acting too slowly or not so responsive, the public gets upset and disenchanted.

## **2 HOW DO YOU DEFINE A STATE-OWNED ENTERPRISE (SOE) IN A MULTILATERAL TRADE AGREEMENT SO THAT BUSINESSES DON'T HAVE TO UNFAIRLY COMPETE WITH SOES?**

The challenge is to find a common definition that speaks to the reality of the situation that (the participating economies) are in.

So I think it's going to be a negotiation process to find some common ground. It may be phased.

## **3 WHEN HAS THE GOVERNMENT OVERSTAYED (ITS USEFULNESS IN A COMPANY)? WHICH ENTERPRISES, OTHER THAN SINGAPORE AIRLINES (SIA), SHOULD NOT BE PRIVATISED?**

I think none of us want to speculate. Even airlines, I would say it's grey. It depends on which country. Some governments have already sold off their national carriers.

In the case of SIA, I think you have made a case. Because we are a transportation hub, it makes logical (sense). Then (it should be considered) whether the seaport should be part of it as well, and so on.

- The book, which details the role of the Government in businesses and private enterprises, will be available at all major bookstores at \$34.75.



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