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

— Mrs Lim Hwee Hua

Govt not like a tap you can turn on & off

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 talk as one of the four panelists at a seminar organised by the Centre for Governance, Institutions & Organisations, NUS Business School and Straits Times Press.

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.

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 support 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.

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.