

Lee Kuan Yew cautions against turning political divide into national divide

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Channel News Asia, 5 September 2011

SINGAPORE: Singapore's former Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew has cautioned Singaporeans against turning the current political divide into a national divide.

He said Singapore could achieve high income growth as compared with its neighbours because during its independence, it had an undivided society that was solidly behind a meritocratic system.

Mr Lee was speaking to 1,800 students at a dialogue session at the Nanyang Technological University on Monday evening. The dialogue - also attended by Education Minister Heng Swee Keat - is part of the annual ministerial forum series organised by the NTU Students' Union.

During the dialogue, Mr Lee acknowledged that the one thing which will change in Singapore and which has already happened is the political divide.

He said as long as the political divide does not degenerate into a national divide, it will not have much impact on the growth of the country.

But Mr Lee warned that if the political divide turned into constant bickering, like what is happening between the Democrats and Republicans in the United States, then Singapore will become just "another ordinary country".

Mr Lee also explained that as Singapore grows more segmented with more diverse educational levels, the country will not have the same homogeneous mass of people to rally behind a single policy.

He said: "What's good for the middle income will be seen by the lower income as unfavourable to them. What is good for the higher income will be resisted by the middle income.

"It is a different society that we face and, therefore, the political leaders will have a much more complicated job of getting the society as a whole to accept a programme which is segmented to meet the needs of various stratas of society."

Another subject of concern during the dialogue was Singapore's immigration policy.

Mr Lee emphasised that a major worry for Singapore's leaders is the fast ageing population, coupled with a drop in fertility rates. Last year, the total fertility rate was at an all-time low of 1.15.

He said: "The birth rate today, the fertility rate, is 1.01. In other words, for every couple, you have 1.01 babies.

"Having said that, the Institute of Policy Studies have the grim statistics of 60,000 migrants a year to keep our economy young. We can't digest that. 20,000 maybe, 25,000 - that's a stretch - but certainly not 60,000."

Mr Lee said the answer is to get couples to have a fertility rate of 1.8 babies or better still, 2.1 babies. Then the population can replace itself.

Mr Lee was also asked about the impact of the recent handing over of the KTM Railway land to Singapore. He said it will benefit ties between the Republic and Malaysia.

Turning to the future, the founding father of modern Singapore stressed that his worry is whether Singaporeans will have the best people in the best jobs.

He said: "My worry about the future is whether we'll have the same national solidarity, the same desire to increase education levels and increase performance and having the best people in the best jobs or holding the most important jobs. Once we veer away from that meritocratic system, our performance will drop."