

Most people in Singapore want to work longer, provided that they are healthy: Lawrence Wong

Many recognise that the minute they stop working is when their health deteriorates very quickly, says Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister.

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SINGAPORE: The majority of workers in Singapore want to work longer as long as they are healthy, said Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong on Monday (Jan 16).

He was responding to infectious diseases expert Paul Tambyah on whether the Silver Support package - which provides lower-income senior citizens with a quarterly cash payout - could be more universal, to avoid a substantial drop in income when these people stop working.

"Would anyone actually want to be operated on by a 70-year-old neurosurgeon? Or ride in a bus driven by a 70-year-old bus driver?" Professor Tambyah asked, during a dialogue at the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Singapore Perspectives Conference.

"The basis of this question is the narrative seems to be that we need to keep working. And if we are unable to do a particular job, we've got to retrain."

Mr Wong replied: "There's obviously a limit to how long we can work. But also we must recognise with rising longevity, with people living longer lifespans, when we do our surveys, the majority of people do want to work longer so long as they are healthy.

"Because a lot of people recognise that the minute they stop working, that's when their health deteriorates very quickly."

Work is more than a source of income, and provides dignity and purpose, he added. "There is something fundamental and important about work."

Mr Wong, who is also finance minister, said it was important to work "consistently" - meaning to hold on to a stable job. "We want to be able to say if you're a new entrant, you're a young adult entering the workforce, work consistently, whatever job you can do, you can be assured of a basic retirement sum."

Former diplomat Kishore Mahbubani also asked whether Mr Wong saw a need to "rebalance" contributions made by the Government and society over the next 10 to 20 years, when it comes to addressing key issues.

"All of us will have to play a key role in changing mindsets and being prepared to pay more for services delivered by our fellow citizens, especially if we are concerned about uplifting the wages of lower income Singaporeans," said Mr Wong in response.

"Certainly, the 'we' is not just Government efforts alone, but we also recognise that the Government has a role to play and can do more."

The minister acknowledged that policies have to be reviewed and updated.

"We think that there is some scope for Government spending to increase," he added, noting that Singapore spends about 18 per cent of its gross domestic product (GDP).

"That's relatively low compared to many other developed countries, but with an ageing population, with needs for healthcare and social spending expected to rise, we think that by 2030, the Government will spend about 20 plus per cent of GDP.

"In other words, you have to find other ways of generating revenues. And Singaporeans must be prepared to do their part to contribute those additional revenues in order for us to meet that increased expenditure and provide the necessary assurances and support for Singaporeans."

FATHERS AT WORK

At the dialogue, Ms Corinna Lim, executive director of the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) advocacy group, asked Mr Wong if paternity leave could be increased.

"It is really important to equalise caregiving at home so that we can have equality in the workplace," she said.

Mr Wong agreed that for younger parents today, fathers want to take care of their children and be more involved - but there remains scope to encourage dads to play a bigger role.

"I think mindsets of employers also need to change," he said.

"But overall, if you look at paternity leave, the take-up rate amongst men in Singapore is still not as high as we would like it to be."

INCLUSIVE POLICIES

A representative from the National Institute of Education (NIE) then noted recent comments made by the president of the Singapore Human Resources Institute, about workforce policies that discriminate against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) individuals.

On Jan 12, Ms Low Peck Kem, who is also the chief human resources officer for the Government's Public Service Division, questioned business leaders who implement such "stupid" policies.

"What is the Government doing to move away, and encourage companies to also move away from such 'stupid' policies and implement some smart, clever ones that are more inclusive?" the NIE representative asked.

Mr Wong noted that discrimination at work would be codified into law.

The laws will require employers to make sure that their employment practices are fair and do not discriminate based on sex, race, religion and age, he stressed.

"Discrimination can take many forms. And we want every employer to make sure that when they hire, when they promote, when they appraise their staff, it's purely on the basis of work and merit, which ought to be the case."

Ms Lim from AWARE also asked about the upcoming legislation.

"Will sexual orientation, gender identity, be included in one of the categories that will be protected by the anti-discrimination act?" she asked.

"Sex is different from gender," Mr Wong said in response.

"It will cover sex, it will cover race, religion, age. We've stated very clearly what the areas of coverage are for the anti-discrimination act," he said, adding that this would be debated in Parliament when the Bill is tabled.