

Plurality of views adds to rigour of policy formulation but it must not lead to paralysis: DPM Heng

"A new balance would not be possible if people insist only on pushing across their views or venture into polemics," said Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat.

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CNA, 23 August 2022

SINGAPORE: A plurality of views adds to the rigour of policy formulation and implementation, said Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat on Tuesday (Aug 23).

Such plurality is natural and should be encouraged, but Singapore must not let this "lead to paralysis", said Mr Heng in his speech at the launch of Monetary Authority of Singapore chief Ravi Menon's book *The Singapore Synthesis: Innovation, Inclusion, Inspiration*.

The book is based on four IPS-Nathan Lectures that Mr Menon delivered in July 2021.

"On a spectrum, groupthink and gridlock are on extreme ends. Gridlock can be as dangerous, if not more so, than groupthink. As with most things, we need to find a path that works in our context," said Mr Heng.

The Deputy Prime Minister said that Singapore needs to take a pragmatic and constructive approach to build common ground.

"While values may drive our conviction, taking an overly ideological approach could very easily lead to gridlock," he added.

While Singapore wants a diversity of views and to debate the different perspectives rigorously, the country also needs leaders with the vision and courage to decide on a course of action.

"Once a decision is taken, it is time to act collectively and decisively, with all hands on deck. And we must periodically review the choices made, to see whether we could do even better," said Mr Heng.

"This is how it works in Singapore, and this has made us successful."

CELEBRATION OF DIVERSITY

In his speech, Mr Heng noted the need to ensure that discourse grows the common space and not diminish it.

"Indeed, diversity is one of the features of our multiracial and multicultural society, one that we should continue to embrace and celebrate," he said.

"But we do not need to look too far back to know that the harmonious state of affairs we have today is not one that should be taken for granted."

He added that there are difficult and deeply emotive issues that societies must grapple with, both locally and globally.

These issues must be handled sensitively and with forbearance, and that progress cannot be made by "advocating loudly for a single viewpoint".

Mr Heng cited the discourse on Section 377A of the Penal Code, a colonial-era law that criminalises sex between men.

On Sunday, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said in the National Day Rally speech that the section of the law will be repealed, while the Constitution will be amended to protect the definition of marriage from being challenged constitutionally in the courts.

Marriage is defined in Section 12 of the Women's Charter as being between a man and a woman. Same-sex marriages are void, according to the law.

The discussion around Section 377A is a longstanding and deep-seated issue, with strong views for and against a repeal, said Mr Heng.

Singapore is moving towards a "new equilibrium", through an extensive closed door consultation that was done in a "candid and constructive manner".

Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong also gave assurances that the definition of marriage will not change under his watch, should the People's Action Party be re-elected in the next General Election, Mr Heng said.

"A new balance would not be possible if people insist only on pushing across their views or venture into polemics," he said, adding that Singaporeans cherish their harmony and common space.

"Even for difficult and evocative issues, parties have approached dialogue with respect, restraint, and rationality.

"Arriving at a new equilibrium on Section 377A will show that even for contentious issues, there can be room for accommodation. But we all need to do our part to carry out dialogue in a way that will move society forward and call out those whose actions undermine the harmony that we so treasure."