

## **Shanmugam calls out Leong Mun Wai for racist comments, making 'condemned' HDB dwellers remark in exchange over race-based policies**

**The Non-Constituency Member of Parliament did not deny the assertions, the Law and Home Affairs Minister noted.**

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SINGAPORE: Non-Constituency Member of Parliament Leong Mun Wai has shown that he does not place much value in Singapore's multiracial approach, and has a [history of making racist comments](#), Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam said in parliament on Wednesday (Feb 5).

Mr Leong said in response that [his stance against the Ethnic Integration Policy \(EIP\)](#) for public housing was based purely on economic grounds.

The exchange took place after Mr Shanmugam responded to a question from the former Progress Singapore Party (PSP) secretary-general about the government's efforts in reviewing the country's CMIO (Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others) framework, an administrative tool for the government to manage policies around race.

Mr Leong said his question stemmed from Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Edwin Tong's comments [at an Institute of Policy Studies conference](#) on Jan 20, in which he said the CMIO model should constantly be reviewed to reflect Singapore's increasingly complex multicultural landscape.

The Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO) model helps the government to administer race-based policies and programmes that promote social cohesion, identify those who need help and safeguard the rights of minorities,...see more

### **VALUE IN MULTIRACIAL APPROACH**

Mr Shanmugam then probed Mr Leong on the rationale behind his question. He added that Mr Leong holds "very different perspectives" from himself and Mr Tong on the CMIO framework and its implications, such as on the EIP.

Introduced in 1989, the EIP sets quotas for the number of flats owned by each racial group in an HDB block or neighbourhood to avoid concentrations of any ethnic group.

"And I think that those different perspectives are clear when, for example, you see some of the things Mr Leong has said in the past, for example, on HDB living," Mr Shanmugam said.

He cited Mr Leong's past comments about Singaporeans being "condemned" to live in HDB flats. According to the Housing Board's website, more than 80 per cent of Singapore's residents live in HDB flats.

"Mr Leong has also made comments in this House which are racist, and he has quite freely admitted to that too," added Mr Shanmugam.

Referring to the parliamentary hansard, Mr Shanmugam cited his exchange with Mr Leong in a September 2021 sitting, during which the topic of the Singapore-India Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) was brought up.

Back then, the minister noted that Mr Leong's comments on CECA had troubled even his own party members who, according to media reports, interpreted the comments as targeting the Indian community and having a racial undertone. Mr Leong eventually said that "there will be some people who will think there is (a) racial undertone".

"If you look at his comments, the 80 per cent of Singaporeans who live in HDB flats are condemned, and if you combine that with his racist comments, Mr Leong may not put much value in our multiracial approach, he may not put value in our ethnic integration in our housing estates," said Mr Shanmugam on Wednesday.

He emphasised that the EIP is a key part of the government's approach to ensure that people are integrated well and that housing estates are well managed.

"And the CMIO is a key plank of those policies," he said.

In response, Mr Leong said that his party supports the EIP, but takes issue with the economic disadvantages.

"There's an economic cost to the minorities, so we are looking (and) we have recommended in this parliament that we should compensate the minorities for that economic cost they have incurred," he explained. "We are not against the EIP at all."

Mr Shanmugam then closed the exchange, noting that Mr Leong did not address his point on the use of the word "condemned" nor allegations of his past racist comments.

"I note that Mr Leong doesn't deny saying that 80 per cent of Singaporeans who live in HDB flats are condemned, and that his comments were racist," he said.

### **Exchange between Mr Shanmugam and Mr Leong**

**Mr K Shanmugam:** Sir, maybe, I think, picking up from what Mr Leong has said, I realised that the question arises from what Mr Edwin Tong has said. Perhaps we have very different perspectives from Mr Leong on CMIO and its implications, for example, on the Ethnic Integration Policy. And I think that those different perspectives are clear when, for example, you see some of the things that Mr Leong has said in the past. For example, on HDB living, if you look at Mr Leong's Facebook post of February 2023, and I quote, he says that Singaporeans are not condemned to living in HDB flats. Mr Leong has also made comments in this House which are racist, and he has quite freely admitted to that too.

So, if I can read out from the Hansard of 14th of September, 2021: I asked him, sir, I asked through you, does Mr Leong accept that his party's statements on CECA, having been interpreted by some of PSP members as being racist, may well be interpreted by Singaporeans as racist as well? And since there was no answer, I had to repeat the question. I asked him again: Some of Mr Leong's party members interpreted his statements as being racist, and I quote, one of the quotes is, you are targeting the Indian community, and it is totally with racial undertone. My question was, if his own party members can think like that, it is entirely possible for other Singaporeans to take a similar view. And I

had to repeat it in a different way, and ask again, Mr Leong, it is commonsensical, is it not, that those PSP members will not be the only ones who think that your statements are racist? If they can think like that, your own party members, then other Singaporeans can reasonably think that your statements are racist too. It's a simple point, and Mr Leong was good enough to say there will be some people who will think that there is a racial undertone to his statements. Yes, and I will hand out these, sir.

But the point I will make arising from his question is this, so if you look at his comments, that 80 per cent of Singaporeans who live in HDB flats are condemned, and if you combine that with his racist comments, Mr Leong may not put much value in our multiracial approach. He may not put value in our ethnic integration, in our housing estates, but the EIP, for example, is a key plank of our policy to ensure that people live together, are integrated, and we put a lot of value in making sure our housing estates are well managed, because we care for Singaporeans, and the CMIO is a key plank of those policies. I hope that clarifies, sir. And if I can, with your leave, hand over just for the record, the copies and for Mr Leong to refresh his memory. One for yourself, sir, and one for Mr Leong.

**Mr Leong Mun Wai:** Mr Speaker, sir, I would like to put on record that PSP supports the EIP, the ethnic integration programme, the policy that we have for HDB flats. What we take issue with is that the EIP has caused economic disadvantages. There's an economic cost to the minorities. So we are looking, we have recommended in this Parliament that we should compensate the minorities for that economic cost they have incurred. So that's all we say. We are not against the EIP at all.

**Mr Shanmugam:** I note that Mr Leong doesn't deny saying that 80 per cent of Singaporeans who live in HDB flats are condemned, and that his comments were racist. Thank you, sir.

## **DIFFERENCES WON'T GO AWAY**

Besides the EIP, Mr Shanmugam had also, in his initial response to Mr Leong, cited the Group Representation Constituency (GRC) system as another race-related policy to help safeguard the rights of minorities here.

The CMIO framework hence helps the government administer race-based policies and programmes that promote social cohesion and identify those who need help, he said.

He acknowledged that there are calls in society to remove the CMIO framework.

"They have claimed that the framework is overly simplistic and rigid, in our increasingly complex and heterogenous society," he said. "But this does not mean that the racial differences will go away."

Mr Shanmugam said evidence from abroad has shown that eliminating such a framework would actually bring worse outcomes for society.

For instance, France banned the collection of race-based data from 1978, but racial tensions remain and the country has seen a surge in race-related offences in recent years, he noted.

Changes over the years to the CMIO framework to keep it relevant include allowing registration of double-barrelled races in 2011, said Mr Shanmugam.

“But we have been cautious about moving away from a framework, which has worked well for us, and has helped to forge the harmonious set of race relations in our society today,” he said.