

Competitive ... and compassionate

S'pore identity is work-in-progress, but can more opportunities be created to level playing field?

Neo Chai Chin

Today, 18 January 2011

SINGAPORE - When her daughter clinched a Ministry of Education scholarship in 2009, Dr Lai Ah Eng asked her if she really needed it, as the family could well afford her International Baccalaureate education at Anglo-Chinese School (Independent).

Dr Lai's daughter asked MOE if she could keep the scholarship title, but not the money. That option was not available.

Yesterday, Dr Lai suggested that well-to-do scholarship recipients be allowed to plough the money awarded into a pool for others, even as they retain the title of scholarship holder.

"We have to build some concrete ideas and turn them into reality and be able to share the wealth," said the senior research fellow at National University of Singapore's Asia Research Institute.

Along with fellow panellists in her segment of the Singapore Perspectives 2011 conference yesterday, Dr Lai discussed the issue of meritocracy in relation to a topic raised by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at last year's National Day Rally: The Singapore Spirit.

Mr Lee had cited then that meritocracy was one of the shared values that defines this spirit.

Yesterday's speakers affirmed their belief in meritocracy but, in the face of greater income disparity and class reproduction, said more opportunities could be made available.

The panellists spoke of a forward-looking Singapore identity and spirit. It may be a work-in-progress, but The Straits Times associate editor Janadas Devan believes the nation has accumulated enough experience to talk about a "Singapore way" or "Singapore model".

Asked by forum participant James Wong if the Singapore Spirit lacked emphasis on patriotism and if new immigrants would jump ship at the slightest trouble, panellist Ori Sasson said it varied from person to person.

But pledging one's allegiance when becoming a citizen shows "a form of interest in the country", said the Israel-born Singapore citizen.

Panellist and plastic surgeon Woffles Wu said a vibrant city with a soul - that allows various professions to flourish - creates a glue that keeps a population together.