IPS 30th Anniversary: Diversities — New and Old
Panel IV: Dialogue

By Wong Kwang Lin

"If in the past we were more equally poor, now we are more unequally rich… managing the challenges of the unequally rich is even more complex than managing the problems of the equally poor."

- Minister Chan Chun Sing

The concluding session of the IPS 30th Anniversary Conference featured a conversation between *The Straits Times* Opinion Editor Chua Mui Hoong, Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing, Chinese Media Group Editor Han Yong May and *Channel NewsAsia* Senior Producer Dawn Tan.

Income inequality in relation to social mobility and discrimination

Ms Tan began the discussion by asking Minister Chan why inequality persists in Singapore despite policy efforts. Minister Chan explained that while the public discourse has focused overwhelmingly on income inequality, judging an individual's worth based on income alone is too simplistic. He suggested that a more fundamental question to ask is whether the Singaporean system fully allows everyone to fulfil their potential. A more equitable distribution of income is only one of the outcomes of the system.

Referring to his own experience of coming from a low-income, single-parent family, he noted that most of the time, he did not feel discriminated for his family background, education or wealth. This gave him the confidence to push through despite the fact that there were people who would look down on him for not exhibiting certain traits associated with class. He encouraged those in similar situations not to allow discrimination to hold them back.

With regard to income inequalities, Minister Chan highlighted two key policy objectives: 1) generating a "rising tide that can raise all boats", and 2) acknowledging those who are left behind and calling on those who are better-off to help out. To him, social mobility is of greater concern than inequality, adding a temporal dimension to the issue. People need to be assured that their future does not depend on the status of their parents, and that their children will be able given the opportunity to fulfil their fullest potential. He noted that as an economy matures, the prospects of social mobility will be reduced. Thus, although Singapore's prospects are healthier than many other developed countries, the problem will become more difficult to address over time. Extreme immobility is undesirable as it leads to people feeling as if they no longer have a stake in society.

Minister Chan subsequently addressed the issue of anti-elitism, citing a conversation with Anglo-Chinese School (Independent) students who were troubled because others were laughing at them for being elitist. He contended that being in an elite school or holding a successful position is not in itself elitist. However, neglecting to reach out to those less privileged than oneself is. Ms Chua Mui Hoong suggested that the phenomenon described by the Minister can be conceived of as "reverse snobbery" — when people of higher conventional social status are looked down on.

Constraints and contradictions in policies for a diverse population

Following Ms Tan's question as to whether class consciousness was a problem in Singapore, Minister Chan said that it was difficult to give a general answer because certain behaviours associated with class status could be variously interpreted in positive or negative ways. For example, his use of non-standard English has in some instances been described as code-switching associated with high-status cosmopolitanism, but on other occasions as being "Ah Beng", which is associated with a low-status identity.

With regard to the objective that Minister Chan had raised in relation to developing people to their fullest potential, Ms Chua points out the fact that public housing policy still denies single, unwed parent families access to permanent subsidised housing. She questioned whether the state can, in good conscience, assure children from such families that they still have the opportunity to develop to their fullest potential, yet with the current avenues of social welfare curtailed. Minister Chan assured that taking care of every child is one of the government's policy objectives. Another conflicting objective is affirming the institution of the family, which involves recognising the concept of parenthood within the context of marriage. These are both worthy objectives to the state but will nevertheless involve trade-offs and "relativities", since the former tries to account for diverse family types while the latter enforces a normative ideal within the current landscape of diversity. He called for a show of hands to demonstrate audience support for each of the two objectives, emphasising how difficult it was to reconcile both of them. (The show of hands indicated that few among the audience members expressed support for the latter.)

Ms Chua ventured that government policy could be amended to reflect the priority of taking care of vulnerable children instead of discriminating against single-parent families. In response, Minister Chan argued that although married couples are given priority in public housing policy, this does not constitute discrimination against unmarried parents; unfortunately, it was interpreted as such. He maintained that the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) is not a "heartless bureaucracy". This is because it evaluates each family's specific needs to see where exceptions can be made. He contended that education is the most significant key to social mobility. Hence MSF emphasises providing children with support from early childhood. Raising the example of the $3 charged for childcare costs (after subsidies) imposed on the lowest income group, he said that such policies are not about the need for economic efficiency, but about giving low-income families a sense of ownership and dignity.

At the same time, Minister Chan pointed out that government policies and subsidies alone are not sufficient as a means of support. Communities need to come together to "touch the lives of these children". He urged the more well-off to help by giving their time and skills to reach out to less privileged families and to act as positive role models. He proposed

that wealthier people do this by "adopting" a less privileged family and keeping in touch with them on a weekly basis. Additionally, people should be sensitive about their entitlement to public funds. In his opinion, Singapore probably has enough resources to take care of the less privileged. However, the main problem faced in the distribution of benefits is that it is difficult to define the term "less privileged", not the availability of resources. At his meet-the-people sessions, for example, there could be genuine appeals from individuals requiring public funds to sustain their lives. However, there are also others who would ask for subsidies even though they may seemingly need it less.

Diversity within and across social groups

Ms Han Yong May posed the question of whether elites, as defined by the benchmarks of yesteryear, are prepared to solve the issues of today. She wonders if failure to address these issues will result in heightened feelings of insecurity among these elites. This, in turn, may further divide society. Minister Chan answered the question by relating three principles: Participation, elitism and diversity.

On participation, he noted that in the past, the notion was that the government would solve all of the country's problems. However, this is now proving to be insufficient. He explained that in today's society, people value a sense of participation and this must be factored into the ways the government relates to the people. Enabling citizens to participate could perhaps be even more important than the services are delivered in themselves.

Minister Chan went on to note that "elite" is a nebulous term. He insisted that an important distinction had to be made between "anti-elitism" and "anti-excellence". He provided the following example: Someone who does well based on his own merit but does not reach out to help the less well-off, is shameful. Even more reprehensible is when someone does well, not by his own merit, and does not reach out to help the less well-off. However, he is now sensing that there is resentment felt against all kinds of elites regardless of whether they have or have not "reached out". He thinks that this is unfair as we should not "pull down" those who have succeeded of their own accord.

He then linked this idea to diversity, suggesting that the anti-elitist sentiments arose from the sense that elites are keeping to themselves and do not try to understand the non-elites. If this is true, as is often assumed of civil servants and those from the SAF, it should be condemned. However, he denies this to be so. In fact, he asserted that labelling all elites as such means overlooking the diversities which exists among them. Ms Tan affirmed this view, mentioning that some interns in her organisation who expressed that they had not wanted members of the public to know they were students of Raffles Institution. As such, they avoided wearing their school hoodies on weekends in public. Minister Chan noted that it is particularly Singaporean to ask someone where they live and what school they are from whenever they meet for the first time. These are attempts to 'pigeonhole' each other and thus should be discouraged.

A participant queried if social mixing could be further promoted among Singaporean men during the time they perform their National Service. She observed from her nephews' experience that boys who take "A" Levels enlist at the same time of the year, making it difficult

to interact with those from other educational backgrounds. She suggested that social mixing is more important than administrative convenience in this context.

Minister Chan replied by recounting his own experience in the SAF, pointing out that he interacted with many servicemen who perform informal work outside the military and came from relatively poor backgrounds, and whom he still considers to be his "brothers" now. Warning against stereotyping based on class, he spoke of former servicemen who may not have highly valued skills, but were fiercely loyal and determined. He added that neither should we assume that the rich lose out by doing the poor favours and helping them. Rather, the rich also benefit by becoming more conscious of the plight of the poor. Based on this belief, he had proposed the policy of building rented and owned HDB flats within the same apartment block. Similarly, new Residents' Networks will no longer be divided between public and private housing estates as Neighbourhood Committees and Residents' Committees are.

Unity in diversity

Another participant asserted that there would always be elites in any society, but we need to bridge the gap between the "masses" and "elites" so that we can grow together as a nation. This is especially so since social mobility as was observed in the early days of independence is less evident today. Minister Chan agreed, and called for a mechanism through which the government can consistently understand the fears, concerns and aspirations of citizens. Such a system is needed to make policies that are responsive to people's needs and be watchful of the country's well-being in the long term. If this is done well, people will not be looked upon by others with disdain just for being successful. He further noted that we should seek out the potential of less privileged groups instead of just focusing on their weaknesses or vulnerabilities. Ms Tan noted that one of the aims of IPS is to examine the hopes and aspirations of Singaporeans. In so doing, a bridge between the public and the government can be built.

In response to Minister Chan's assertion that leaders are diverse, Ms Han asked how those in government can resolve their differences and present a united front while avoiding the fallacies of "groupthink". Minister Chan said that the bottom line was to place the welfare of Singaporeans first, and to consider the necessary trade-offs between long-term and short-term gains. He emphasised Singapore's need to be independent, to continue surviving against the odds and to keep alive Lee Kuan Yew's dream that Singaporeans will desire to be called Singaporeans forever. Although this can be a challenging task, he provided the assurance that we can be optimistic given that the leaders of Singapore's early independence had achieved success even though they started out with fewer resources and a less skilled population. Since these pioneer leaders were able to do this, the Minister's opinion was that we can achieve even more for the next generation.

Going back to Ms Han's question, Minister Chan said that government leaders will always debate their positions as part of the decision-making process. However, once a collective decision is made, all efforts will be made to convince the rest of the population of this position. This is why ministers talk about government decisions even if these are not within their immediate mandate. He expressed hope that in the same way, Singaporeans will also have a diversity of perspectives as it is a strength that helps us check each other's "blind spots" even as we place the interest of the nation first. Thus, beyond the policy level, communities and

individuals need to take up the responsibility of building cohesion. Finally, he declared that if Singaporeans feel respected and not differentially valued based on their income or other social markers, such positive sentiments will take precedence over concerns based purely on statistical reports on inequality in the country.

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