

S'pore should ‘move with more urgency towards gracious society’

SIAU MING EN

TODAY, 10 October 2017

SINGAPORE – The push for a more gracious society should take on greater urgency in order for Singapore to thrive in the decades ahead, said former head of the civil service Lim Siong Guan on Tuesday (Oct 10).

Calling on Singaporeans to play their part, Mr Lim also said the government could facilitate the endeavour by considering if the policies crafted reinforce or detract from the goal.

Physical infrastructure such as common spaces in Housing and Development Board estates can help promote graciousness, as can public servants who are “more thinking of the people they are serving”.

“If, as a people, we become oriented that way, I believe it will have this effect on the way government policies are delivered, in the way that people are just looking out for each other,” he told an audience of about 400 at the second of three Institute of Policy Studies-Nathan lectures.

A gracious society can ward against the “social degradation and national decay” that British soldier and scholar John Bagot Glubb found to afflict nations once they reached high levels of affluence, said Mr Lim.

Surveys and his discussions with Singaporeans indicate that people wish to see a gracious society.

Having a gracious society in SG100, or Singapore’s 100th year of independence, topped the wish list of more than 60 participants in their 20s and early 30s at a workshop Mr Lim attended last November. Participants wanted to see society going beyond academics and focusing on active ageing, among other things.

This was also what Labour Movement leaders in their 40s and 50s had wished for, when he met them on a separate occasion in 2015. The leaders also wanted work-life balance and an innovative, creative and smart Singapore, among other things.

Yet, in a 2015 survey of national values, the top trait Singaporeans noticed among those around them was being kiasu (afraid of losing out). Asked about personal values, the respondents cited family, responsibility and friendship, among others.

This raises an “interesting question”, said Mr Lim. “If everyone is saying (those values are) most important, the question is, how come we are not seeing it?”

A gracious society is not only about helping the displaced, the handicapped, the poor and the "misfits", he said.

It is about the kampung spirit -- the "countless little interactions between neighbours and everyone else we mix with or have to work with every day of the week. It is the little things that define culture and the reality of society", said Mr Lim.

"It may well take a generation, and we have to start now, building upon what has been done in the past, but moving in a far more deliberate, urgent, and holistic manner," he said.

The Japanese show it is possible to foster a culture where people look out for one another, he said. For instance, customers at a restaurant would skip coffee after their meals to allow others waiting in line to have their turn more quickly.

"I quote Japan not to urge everyone to become Japanese cultural clones, but to show that it is possible to have a social environment where people feel a sense of being recognised and being treated with respect and consideration. These are the little day-to-day things that we all can do," said Mr Lim.

In his first IPS-Nathan lecture last month, Mr Lim had touched on the circumstances of Singapore's unexpected independence and social challenges brought about by its economic prosperity.

S'pore should now aim to be First World society: Lim Siong Guan

Elgin Toh

Having developed a First World economy, Singapore should now seek to cultivate a First World society – one marked by graciousness towards one another, said former head of civil service Lim Siong Guan at a lecture last night.

Graciousness is about looking beyond one's needs to the needs of others, he said. It is not just about helping the poor and the displaced, but also about “the countless little interactions” between neighbours, colleagues and others one meets throughout the day.

“It is the little things that define culture and the reality of society,” he added.

To illustrate his point, Mr Lim gave a few Japanese examples.

A friend of his visited Japan. After lunch, he was asked if he wanted coffee. He said yes, but noticed his Japanese friends declined. They later explained they saw others waiting for a table. “So his friends decided the right thing to do was to release their table as quickly as possible,” he said.

Another story: A group climbed the Sydney Harbour Bridge. After the climb, most used their towels to wipe off their sweat, but the Japanese in the group also used them to wipe the safety gear clean.

“They were doing it in consideration of the next group,” he said.

A third story: Once, Mr Lim was

picked up at a Tokyo airport by a chauffeur. He helped Mr Lim get to the carpark with his luggage and then told him to wait at the kerbside while he ran to the car, instead of walking. “This was his expression of considerate service.”

The Japan examples are “not to urge everyone to become Japanese cultural clones”, he said, but to show it is possible to forge a gracious social environment.

Mr Lim was speaking at the National University of Singapore in his second lecture as SR Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore.

Its main theme is building a better Singapore for its fourth generation, with graciousness being an essential trait for a happy Singapore.

Making the link between graciousness and happiness, Mr Lim cited a book, *The Hidden Wealth Of Nations*, by David Halpern. It argues that wealthy societies can become happier only by improving the quality of relationships, and not by accumulating more wealth.

One reason is that humans “derive an enormous sense of satisfaction and fulfilment” from helping and serving others, he said.

In forging graciousness, the Government can merely facilitate, he said, by building more common spaces in housing estates, for instance.

Responsibility lies with each person taking the initiative to befriend his neighbours in those spaces.

But there is cause for optimism, Mr Lim said.



Mr Lim gave his second lecture as SR Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore, at NUS last night.

Groups of Singaporeans he has interacted with in seminars, whether young or old, all rank a gracious society very highly, when asked what they want for Singapore in 50 years’ time.

As this is a cultural shift which takes a long time to achieve – perhaps 30 to 40 years or more – Singapore should begin now if it wants to bring about the change by SG100, the time of the fourth generation of Singaporeans, Mr Lim said.

“It requires conviction, tenacity and action now.”

Start with today’s young, he urged, citing the Chinese saying, *san sui ding zhong shen*, which means: “At age three, you know what a person will be like for life.”

He noted that primary school teachers would sometimes say they have to “undo the damage” parents did at home. Values like graciousness are more often “caught by example” than “taught by instruction”, he pointed out.

“Developing a whole culture and value system starts from the home, reinforced by school and society,” he said.

elgintoh@sph.com.sg

‘Singapore should aim to be gracious society’

ELGIN TOH, THE STRAITS TIMES

Having developed a First World economy, Singapore should now seek to cultivate a First World society marked by graciousness, former head of civil service Lim Siong Guan said in a lecture last night.

Graciousness is about looking beyond one's needs to the needs of others, he said. It is not just about helping the poor and the displaced, but also about “the countless little interactions” between neighbours, colleagues and others throughout the day.

“It is the little things that define culture and the reality of society,” he added.

Mr Lim gave a few Japanese examples.

A friend of his visited Japan. After lunch, he was asked if he wanted coffee. He said yes, but noticed his Japanese friends declined. They explained they saw others waiting for a table.

“So his friends decided the right thing to do was to release their table as quickly as possible,” he said.

In another instance, a group climbed the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Afterwards, most used their towels to wipe off sweat, but the Japanese in the group also used it to wipe the safety gear clean.

“They were doing it in consideration of the next group,” he said.

The examples are “not to urge everyone to become Japanese cultural clones”, but to show it is possible to forge a gracious social environment.

Mr Lim was speaking at the National University of Singapore in his second lecture as S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore.

Its main theme is building a better Singapore for its fourth generation, with graciousness being an essential trait for a happy Singapore.

Mr Lim cited a book, *The Hidden Wealth Of Nations* by David Halpern, which argues that wealthy societies can become happier only by improving the quality of relationships.

elgintoh@sph.com.sg

林祥源：培养国人守望相助 有助缓和社会出现负面特征

林心惠 报道

limxh@sph.com.sg

建立一个人人相互关怀与帮忙的优雅社会，将是新加坡持续取得成功的要素之一。

前公务员首长林祥源昨天在“新加坡会走下坡吗？”系列讲座的第二讲中延续首场讲座的话题，指历来许多国家的崛起与没落，大致上都经历开埠、扩张、致富、自私、自满到颓丧等阶段。在他看来，新加坡社会已出现公民意识下降和物质主义等负面特征，鼓励国人培养守望相助的精神，是“缓和”国家衰弱的方式之一。

林祥源是“新加坡政策研究所—纳丹讲座”本年度主讲人。

“新加坡会走下坡吗？”系列讲座共分成三部分，他昨天在一小时演讲中强调国人应现在就从身边做起，为子孙立下优雅社会的基础。

“每个时代的人都必须解决他们自己的问题。但有些东西需要超过一代人的努力才会逐渐成形。对于这些东西，我们必须现在就采取行动，以便未来正好到位。建立优雅社会就是这么一种东西。这将使新加坡从世界各国中脱颖而出。”

林祥源指出，他过去两年无论是跟20来岁或四五十岁国人交流时，得到的答复是人们最希望新加坡50年后能成为一个优雅社会。

在另一项调查中，新加坡人认为家人、责任、友谊和关怀等是最重要的。不过，被问及对其他国家人的感观时，多数人却选择了怕输、好争、物质主义和怕死等负面描述。

他说，这种结果有两种解释，一是受访者为了呈现正面形象而没有如实作答，而第二种解释比较微妙，反映了国人眼界变得狭隘所造成的问题。

林祥源说：“（国人看待自己与他人的方式）都是诚实和真实的。我的家人对我而言最重要，我会为了我的家人而插队；我会与女儿的老师吵架，因为我的家人最重要。别人可能认为我的行为很怕输，但我这么做，只因为家人对我是最重要的体现。”

他指出，优雅社会和“甘榜精神”反映人与人之间的关系，政府只能从旁鼓励和促进国人关怀彼此，相比之下，父母扮演关键角色，国人应从小培养孩子行善和关怀他人的价值观。