

More honest talk needed

Lin Yan Qin

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SINGAPORE - By omitting the pig from its line-up of Chinese zodiac toys, was fast-food chain McDonald's being "hyper social sensitive" and patronising Muslims in Singapore by presuming they would be offended?

It certainly arises from a lack of truly open discussion among Singaporeans when it comes to race and religion, believes National University of Singapore sociologist Daniel Goh.

Social cohesion was the focus of the first panel discussion at the annual Singapore Perspectives conference held yesterday by the Institute of Policy Studies. And Dr Goh, one of the speakers, felt that current efforts to promote greater cohesion amongst different ethnic and religious groups lack depth.

Having people dress up in each others' ethnic costumes or taking part in the traditional dances of different ethnic groups during Racial Harmony Day are activities that reinforce "positive stereotypes".

"It's not about talk, it's not about dialogue, it's about creating (happy) sentiments," he said.

While McDonald's, which eventually included the pig, declined yesterday to comment further on the matter, Dr Goh wants to see race and religion discussed more openly rather than marked as "sensitive" issues.

Self-censorship would lower the capacity to talk about issues, which then erodes trust and creates a fear of "others", becoming a "vicious cycle", he said. And more of the same kind of education was not necessarily the answer.

In making social studies compulsory, students should be given "the space to get out there and socialise and say racist stuff, so that we can correct them", said Dr Goh.

Fellow panellist and civil servant Aaron Maniam said that for honest and constructive dialogue to happen, there needs to be a "prerogative to not take offence".

Rather than react instinctively -- and in strong, almost defensive terms -- when "someone does something that touches that chord of ethnic/religious identity" the president of Mendaki Club said we need to "internalise a bit".

For example, in classrooms, rather than simply avoiding racial stereotypes, it is better to "have the emotional confidence" to explain and discuss them when they come up, said Mr Maniam, also chair of the youth sub-committee at Singapore Indian Development Association.

As efforts are being made to integrate newcomers into Singapore, "talking" is all the more important. Mr Maniam said Singaporeans should find more opportunities to mix with both citizens and non-citizens. In this way they would find that this "abstract other" that we criticise and fear also shares the same hopes and fears and aspirations.

One problem arising from Singapore's immigration policy, he said, is that its benefits were

"too diffuse" across the macro-economy, but the cost, such as a potential threat to jobs, was "individualised". "The benefits need to be individualised and humanised," he said.