

Ambassador Tommy Koh says Straits Times coverage of IPS conference biased, S'pore leaders jump in, take sides

This is the sort of public debate Singaporeans appreciate coming from leaders, even though it is on Facebook.

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It has been an eventful political Saturday.

As three Workers' Party (WP) MPs announced that they are halting donations after receiving S\$1 million in three days, Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh had just completed reading The Straits Times coverage of the Institute of Policy Studies 30th anniversary conference that happened the previous two days.

But what happened next ended up determining how a few leaders of Singapore spent their Saturday afternoon.

Tommy Koh's Facebook post

So, Koh decided to write the following Facebook post:

"I participated actively and happily in the 30th anniversary dinner and conference of IPS on Thursday and Friday. Both events were very successful. I salute IPS director Janadas Devan for having the courage to invite my good Friend, Professor Cherian George to speak in session 3 of the conference.

I would like to ask the Straits Times why it had photos of the speakers and moderators of sessions 1, 2 and 4 but not 3? Is a photo of Janil Puthuchearu and Cherian George against our national interest?

I would also point out to my friends in the ST that their biased reporting on the conference brings discredit to our media. For example, the paper reported Minister Josephine Teo's argument that minimum wage could cause unemployment and illegal employment but not my rebuttal that that narrative is contradicted by the experience of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong which have adopted a minimum wage. I think the current income disruption of Singapore is a moral disgrace. Many of our working people do not earn a living wage and live in poverty. The Progressive Wage Model has improved wages in certain sectors of our economy but the workers in those sectors still do not earn a living wage. Mr Lee Kuan Yew envisaged an income distribution which resembles an olive. Today, our income distribution resembles a pear. Think about it."

Maybe Prof Koh was expecting coverage like this (advertisement alert):

(image)

Koh vs Straits Times Opinion Editor

ST Opinion Editor Chua Mui Hoong, the lady in blue and a fellow participant at the IPS conference, stepped in and expressed her disappointment with Koh's accusation of biased reporting by ST.

Chua, who edits Koh's commentaries in ST, explained that "newspaper space is limited" and urged some empathy from Koh to "consider the space and time constraints they operate under that lead to omissions and not attribute omissions to bias".

Chua also appealed to his past working relationship with ST, saying that Koh knows for sure that "ST will not shut out alternative views" from him.

Chua added that ST was after all the medium that hosted Koh's first article advocating a minimum wage years ago, as she believed that Koh's views enrich the national discourse.

Chua's response brought about a subsequent rebuttal from Koh, who continued to argue that "biased reporting is a consistent pattern of ST".

Koh added that "the ST report is focused on what the DPM said at the Dialogue. It omits reference to all the facts I cited on poverty and inequality in Singapore. The Dialogue was reported as a monologue".

Perhaps Prof Koh was expecting something like this.

(image)

Which led to Chua explaining that ST "sometimes over focus on what the main speaker says, that is true", and agreed with Koh that it was "indeed a dialogue and a bracing one".

Chua further explained to another reader that while the mainstream media remains vital, there are plenty of other platforms in the media landscape.

She said that mainstream media "must be fair and even handed" and thinks that they can do better.

Koh vs Temasek Chairman and former Minister

And just when we thought the online exchange between Koh and Chua was over, Temasek Chairman and former Minister Lim Boon Heng stepped into the fray.

This time, the topic was on the issue that Koh was passionate about — the implementation of minimum wage in Singapore.

Lim explained to Koh that the evidence on minimum wage is at best mixed.

In fact, Lim noted that there were "studies that show higher unemployment caused by the minimum wage, but proponents for the minimum wage are not satisfied with those studies".

Lim concluded that prescribing a minimum wage may feel intuitively right, but may not be the best way.

Lim believed that employers should subscribe to the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals, saying that if employers imbibe the values behind those goals, they will pay workers a fair wage.

So, now is time for Koh to reply to another good friend.

Actually, his reply was a series of questions — five questions, in fact.

The last question was on an assessment on Singapore's progressive wage model, which was also a question posed to DPM Tharman Shanmugaratnam on the first evening of the conference.

Lim replied Koh with a question, asking whether he would accept that there are studies that show the adverse consequences of the minimum wage.

Lim then concluded that Singapore has an alternative to the minimum wage (in the form of Workfare), and he thinks that it is superior.

The key man in the saga speaks

So, it's left to academic, former ST journalist and Hong Kong expatriate Cherian George, one of the more eloquent speakers in the conference, to sum things up.

Cherian first clarified that he was not upset that ST did not use photos of him and Senior Minister of State Janil Puthuchery.

Using self-deprecating humour, Cherian said that it could have been "an aesthetic decision".

Cherian recalled Puthuchery's quip, that their panel was a "panel of balding Malayalee men".

Yeah, Cherian is right.

However, Cherian's more pertinent points were these: 1) It would be sad if indeed inviting him required "courage"; and that 2) media coverage of Cherian and Janil's "minor disagreement created such waves".

After that, Cherian paid a tribute to Koh in his blog, calling the veteran diplomat a "national treasure".

Cherian said that Singapore leaders need to value multiculturalism, rather than discuss diversity as a "fault line".

In short, they should be learning from Koh.

So, that concludes the whole Saturday afternoon of many important people posting on Koh's Facebook page.

Enjoy your Saturday evening, everyone.

Or spend your weekend catching up on our IPS conference coverage.