

Lawrence Wong on 'Chinese privilege' in S'pore, why we need GRCs, & importance of mutual compromise

He was delivering a speech on multiracialism at the IPS-RSIS Forum on Race and Racism in Singapore.

Mothership, 26th June 2021

On June 25, 2021, Minister for Finance Lawrence Wong delivered a speech titled "Multiracialism and Faultlines" at a forum on Race and Racism in Singapore, jointly organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).

In his speech, he delved into the history of Singapore's multi-racial society, calling the question of race a "fundamental issue from the beginning".

Policies can always be changed and improved, he noted, adding that the government will continue to engage widely and update its policies on race.

Sections from his [full speech](#) are reproduced here.

Delivered by Lawrence Wong

For Singapore, the question of race has been a fundamental issue from the beginning.

To put it simply: If race did not pose an existential challenge, Singapore would never have separated from Malaysia, and we would never have become an independent, sovereign state.

Our 23 months in the federation showed the tendency of each race to emphasise its identity, its rights, and its primacy – often at the expense of others.

Against the grain, our founding leaders set out to build a “Singaporean Singapore”.

But our founding leaders also knew that creating a Singaporean Singapore was not simply a matter of mouthing slogans. They knew we needed deliberate policies, carefully thought out safeguards, and resolute efforts to ensure:

- That minorities would be protected;
- That the majority would not abuse its dominance;
- That bigots and chauvinists from whatever race would be constrained and curbed.

GRC system in Singapore

I know not all agree with the policies we have put in place. For example, some believe the GRC (Group Representation Constituency) system is not necessary, as Singaporeans can be trusted to vote for the best candidates, of whatever race, without the aid of the GRCs.

But look at the United States, another polyglot society. There, the courts have intervened to ensure electoral districts with built-in majorities of African-Americans and Hispanics, so as to have diverse representation in their legislatures.

In Singapore, because we want racially integrated rather than segregated housing, we no longer have constituencies with built-in majorities of Indians and Malays. Instead, we have the GRC system to ensure at least a minimum number of minority legislators in Parliament.

So whether it is America or Singapore, both have systems to guarantee the representation of minorities in legislatures. Both recognise you cannot have E Pluribus Unum – Out of Many, One – by simply assuming the many don't exist.

I respect the views of Singaporeans who believe we are ready to move beyond race, and so think we no longer need the GRC system. Believe me, nobody would be more pleased than the PAP leadership – past and present, from Lee Kuan Yew and S Rajaratnam onwards – if one day we no longer needed the GRC system to ensure sufficient minority representation in Singapore.

But we are not yet totally immune to the siren calls of exclusive racial and cultural identities. Neither have we reached a “post-racial” state.

Important for the majority to be sensitive to the needs of minorities

First, we must recognise that in any multi-racial society, it is harder to be a minority than a majority. This is so everywhere in the world.

So, it is important for the majority community in Singapore to do its part, and be sensitive to and conscious of the needs of minorities. This cuts across all aspects of daily life.

It matters to someone who faces discrimination when looking for a job.

It matters when someone feels left out when everyone else in a group speaks in a language that not all can understand.

It matters to potential tenants who learn that landlords do not prefer their race.

It matters to our students, neighbours, co-workers and friends who have to deal with stereotypes about their race, or insensitive comments.

These things do happen, not always, and perhaps not even often, but sometimes they do. And when they do happen, they cause real hurt, which is not erased by lightly dismissing them as casual remarks or jokes. I believe the majority community in Singapore understands this.

So I ask that we do more and take the extra step to make our minority friends, neighbours, co-workers feel comfortable. Treat others in the way you would like to be treated; and by your actions, teach your children to do the same. Remind those among your family members or friends who may slip up from time to time.

At the same time, I am grateful that minorities have reciprocated by recognising that the majority community has legitimate needs and concerns too.

"Chinese privilege" in S'pore

In this regard, it is important to realise that the Chinese community in Singapore is not monolithic. Sometimes, people talk about "Chinese privilege" in Singapore.

There may well be biases or blind spots that the Chinese community should become aware of and to rectify.

But please understand that we still have a whole generation of Chinese Singaporeans who are more comfortable in Chinese than English, and who consider themselves at a disadvantage in an English-speaking world.

They feel that they have already given up much to bring about a multi-racial society: Chinese-language schools, Nanyang University, dialects, and so on.

"What do you mean by 'Chinese privilege'?" they will ask, for they do not feel privileged at all. Naturally, many of them would object to being so characterised.

Continuing the approach of mutual accommodation, trust, and compromise

This brings me to my second point, which is that we must continue with our approach of mutual accommodation, trust and compromise.

Let me be clear: I am not saying that we should refrain from voicing our unhappiness, or that minority Singaporeans should pipe down about the prejudices they experience.

On the contrary, we should be upfront and honest about the racialised experiences various groups feel, and deal squarely with them.

We must continue to speak up, and even be prepared to have uncomfortable discussions – not to start arguments, but to begin civilised discussions, listen to each other, and understand all points of view.

But we should not insist on maximum entitlements and rights for our respective groups; construe every compromise as an injustice that needs to be condemned; or put the worst interpretation on every perceived slight or insensitivity.

Because when one group jostles aggressively to assert its identity and rights over others, it will not take long before other groups feel put upon, and start to jostle back.

We already see this playing out in so many places around the world: when one side uses identity politics to push their cause, it invariably emboldens another to up the ante and make greater demands.

We end up fuelling our worst tendencies – our tribalism, hostility and vengefulness. If we go down this path, insisting on differences over commonality, minority groups will not win, and the outcome will be most unhappy for the majority community too.

So I hope all groups calling for change will be conscious about how they approach the matter.

It is natural to want to be heard, to want to see the changes we think ought to happen. But let's do so in ways that:

- Expand the space for agreement, not narrow it;
- Deepen cross-cultural understanding, not cause defensiveness and suspicion;
- Appeal to the better angels in all of us, not instigate a “them vs us” dynamic.

Govt to continue to update policies on race

Finally, the Government will continue to engage widely, and to update our policies on race, as well as other policies that help to strengthen racial harmony in Singapore.

Our policies are not cast in stone. For any policy – be it GRC, EIP (Ethnic Integration Policy), Self-Help Groups, or SAP (Special Assistance Plan) schools, we continually ask ourselves: what is it that we are trying to achieve? Is the policy still relevant today? Can it be further fine-tuned or improved?

One current example is our review of Muslim nurses wearing the tudung with their uniform. This process of policy review entails detailed study and extensive dialogue

between the Government and our various communities. It cannot be rushed, nor should things be changed simply based on who shouts the loudest.

Ultimately, any change must expand our common space, and strengthen our racial harmony, while allowing each community as much room as possible to go about its way of life.