

# Lawrence Wong on 'golden age of ignorance' & Covid-19 'armchair epidemiologists' at IPS conference

*Mandy How & Andrew Koay*

*Mothership*, 25 January 2021

Minister for Education and Co-chair of the Multi Ministry Taskforce (MTF) Lawrence Wong has a thing or two to say about those who are fond of airing their views of the Covid-19 pandemic and how it should be managed.

Wong was speaking at a dialogue session for the Singapore Perspectives forum, organised by the the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), on Jan. 25, 2021.

## **Opportunity to strengthen social solidarity**

Out of the setbacks that Singapore has encountered in the past year, one silver lining that the pandemic has presented is the opportunity for us to strengthen our sense of social solidarity, Wong argued.

Even before Covid-19 existed, there were already "powerful forces chipping away at social cohesion," both in Singapore and other countries, Wong said.

He added that there are "significant minorities" around the world who think that Covid-19 is a hoax, even as more than 100 million have been infected globally.

And this is a source of great irony, Wong noted, as information is easily accessible from multiple sources.

"And so the irony is despite the overwhelming ease of access of information, we are living as some would say in a golden age of ignorance," he said.

## **Armchair experts**

Wong also touched on the online "experts" that have emerged during the crisis:

"We are also seeing the downgrading of expertise. Because experts are seen as out-of-touch elites, and expert knowledge is sometimes portrayed negatively as a conspiracy by the elites to perpetuate their dominance.

[...]

And with easy access to information, everyone can claim to be an expert. Let's look at how many armchair epidemiologists have emerged during this crisis. Virtually everyone thinks they can say something intelligent about how the virus spreads."

However, he also acknowledged that the pseudo-experts serve their own purpose:

"Nothing wrong with that. And in fact, it leads to more scepticism and questioning of expert advice, which is, in a way, healthy, because you know experts don't always get it right, you do need to have some level of questioning."

But he cautions against disregarding expertise or self-selecting information just to reinforce our own points of view without seeing things from another perspective.

This would make it very hard to "find consensus", and thus allow extreme views to gain ground and become a divisive point for society.

Nonetheless, Wong is confident of the opposite — that Singapore will "prevail and emerge stronger from this crucible."

"I speak from my own conviction of seeing the best of Singaporeans over the past year in the face of adversity and very tough conditions.

I've seen frontline workers both in the public and private sectors giving they're all working around the clock. Throughout the past year, I've seen many ground up initiatives, people stepping out of their comfort zones to look out for the vulnerable, and to help those in need."

### **Three resets**

The conversation was in the context of three "resets" that Singapore needs to make after the virus has done its damage.

These resets concern policy thinking, as well as our lifestyles and mindsets.

### **Fairer, more equal society**

The first change that Wong hoped was for Singapore to emerge from the pandemic as a "fairer and more equal society".

Addressing the widening gap between the "haves" and "have-nots" have always been at the top of the government's agenda, said Wong, adding that open markets had to be combined with "effective state intervention to level the playing field".

As education minister, Wong spoke of his desire to maintain social mobility within Singapore through investments in preschools and equipping schools who have higher proportion of students from lower income and disadvantaged family backgrounds.

He also made note of the need for fundamental changes to Singapore's "model of education", where learning would no longer be crammed into the first 20 years of an individual's but instead sustained and updated throughout one's lifetime.

In addition, a mindset change was needed, opined Wong, in regard to how Singaporeans perceived and ultimately rewarded jobs that utilise non-intellectual abilities.

"If we attach more value, in terms of prestige and income to people who excel across a wide range of fields... incomes will naturally spread out more evenly across society."

### **A greener Singapore**

The next change Wong called for was a "greener" Singapore, calling climate change an "existential emergency".

"We are already one of the greenest cities in the world," said Wong.

“But we must go further and build on what we have done to achieve greener growth and greener mindsets.”

He pointed to some of the plans the government was undertaking, such as the development and implementation of renewable energy sources, phasing out petrol and diesel vehicles, and designing HDB towns with sustainable living in mind.

However, if Singapore continued to go green, Wong said, the nation would be able to position itself as a future hub for carbon trading and services in Asia, as well as service the region in the area of green finance.