

## **Tommy Koh spoke his mind & was full of quotable quotes at S'pore Bicentennial Conference**

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The Singapore Bicentennial Conference, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies, was held at the Raffles City Convention Centre.

The second day of the conference was held on Oct. 1.

Besides reflecting on the 200-year history of Singapore since the arrival of Stamford Raffles, the conference looked into how governance here has evolved, as the country has become a post-colonial state.

### **First-World country, Third-World citizens**

Professor Tommy Koh, who is Singapore's Ambassador-at-Large, took part in a dialogue with Bloomberg News editor-in-chief John Micklethwait, with the panel moderated by Warren Fernandez, Straits Times editor and editor-in-chief of Singapore Press Holdings.

During the dialogue, Koh shared some observations he had about Singapore, which was reported by The Straits Times on Oct. 1.

Koh noted that many Singaporeans "don't give a damn for the environment when they should" and that he is "more critical of Singaporeans than of the government".

"Many of our people are selfish and unkind. Just look at the way they drive," he said.

### **Protect workers and making Singapore more equal**

Koh also put forth several suggestions for the 4G leaders via an eight-point agenda which he drew up for the country's next prime minister and his team to consider as part of their priorities in governance.

This agenda contains salient issues that affect the everyday Singaporean, covering a range of topics that Koh had previously spoken about at length, such as inequality, the ASEAN region and censorship.

Koh urged the 4G leaders to prioritise racial and religious harmony and to commit themselves to making Singapore a more equal society, and at the same time growing the economy sustainably.

### **Workers' wages should be raised**

He noted that there was a wide pay gap between a company's top executives and the employees at the lower rung of the ladder.

He highlighted that Singapore was not a classless society, as we find ourselves being divided by differences in wealth, income, our careers, where we stay and where we study.

As a potential economic downturn will affect a good number of Singaporeans, Koh called for setting a poverty line in Singapore and raising the wages of workers.

“We should not abandon the displaced workers because we don’t want more and more Singaporeans to become Grab drivers or worse, to join the ranks of the angry voters,” Koh was quoted saying.

### **On an ASEAN focus, and welcoming criticism**

Advocating for green technology and finance, Koh said that Singapore must become a leader in the field of environment and development.

He suggested that Singapore can do more to promote the use of solar energy and electric vehicles, though he lamented that Singapore is lagging behind our Japanese and Korean counterparts, mainly due to our “risk adverse” nature.

Singapore could also focus on the ASEAN countries as a way to counter the economic downturn, investing and trading within and with more ASEAN countries, and encouraging trips, internships and exchange programmes with them.

### **Censorship not necessary as long as critics love Singapore**

On censorship, Koh hopes that the 4G leaders would be able to welcome criticism “as long as the critics love Singapore”.

Koh mentioned that the government should not have banned Tan Pin Pin’s film, To Singapore, With Love, nor withdrew grants for Sonny Liew’s graphic novel The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye and Jeremy Tiang’s novel The State of Emergency.

Koh said: “The contestation of ideas is a necessary part of democracy. We should therefore not blacklist intellectuals, artists, writers because they criticise the government or hold dissenting views.”

Koh warned that Singapore’s success had made it more cautious and conservative, and thus called for our 4G leader to “have fire in his or her belly”.

Koh said that such a leader must have the courage, and be an independent thinker.

“To survive and prosper,” Koh mentioned, “Singapore too should be a “leader in innovation, not a camp follower”.