

Tommy Koh's point was that some S'poreans will treat others like sh*t if they can get away with it

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Straits Times hashes out "Third World people" term

On Oct. 6, The Straits Times published a piece, "Why are Singaporeans a Third World people?"

This piece came after what Singapore's Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh recently said about Singaporeans at the Oct. 1 Singapore Bicentennial Conference.

What was the ST piece about?

ST's piece consisted of stringing together the opinions of eight people in Singapore, whose views were elevated and put on the national agenda, to continue the discussion on what the good professor Koh candidly said a week ago.

Six of those quoted by ST are de facto brand names, with two others who are regular, everyday man on the street.

Although not framed by ST as such, all eight of them essentially gave answers that served to show that some Singaporeans do at times behave less than optimally as human beings, especially when they can get away with it.

The ST piece also attempted to get at why this would be the case in Singapore, supposedly a First World country.

In random order, this was what they said:

1. Kishore Mahbubani, former dean of Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy provided an example of Singaporeans as lousy employers.

His domestic helper once asked for some time off to go to the airport to send off a fellow domestic helper who was repatriated by her employer as she had broken her arm.

2. A regular Singaporean, Ahmad Farid Zakaria, 33, a technical officer, provided an example of where Singaporeans' strong sense of self-entitlement lie.

Drivers who want to change lanes don't signal, or do so at the last minute.

3. Another regular Singaporean, Devan Tay, 41, a financial planner, said it is self-entitlement that promotes and begets such behaviour, whereby whoever pays more, should then have the right of way.

He added: "Singaporeans have learnt to become more self-serving and less kind to others."

4. Paulin Straughan, Singapore Management University sociologist provided the explanation as to why Singapore, a modern metropolis, could be so cold.

She said people in densely populated cities turn into “faceless entities” that can be more easily ignored.

She said: “We can’t really have a First World country with Third World behaviour. It’s the community that defines the country.”

5. Tan Ern Ser, National University of Singapore sociologist, also pointed to the environment, which he attributed as a cause of Singaporeans hardening in the face of other people’s plights.

He said Singaporeans have been socialised to think of oneself and one’s own immediate family over others, with too much emphasis placed on individual success and comfort.

6. Liak Teng Lit, former National Environment Agency chairman, said it is because communalism and cooperation is lacking in modern society.

This is almost as if doing more out of one’s own volition is to be shortchanged.

He said that in advanced societies, there is a tendency to “professionalise and monetise almost every role”.

This could mean that a cleaner’s job is to clean because the cleaner was paid to do that.

7. Anthea Ong, a Nominated MP, provided a way to deal with being less cold and calculative.

She said Singapore is not just a physical space, but it is about Singaporeans’ relationship with one another, and that the definition of, “What is a Singaporean?” must now come from the people and not the government.

8. William Wan, Singapore Kindness Movement general secretary, said Singaporeans must be more “other-centred” and “to think of others before ourselves” as a starting point.

Background

In case the message got lost in the sea of discussions, some of which are cogent and others which are pointless, it’s good to reiterate what Singapore’s Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh recently said about Singaporeans at the Oct. 1 Singapore Bicentennial Conference.

Besides laying out a wish list for Singapore’s fourth generation leaders, Koh’s feedback for Singaporeans was that they lack civic-mindedness.

But what ruffled feathers the most was that the veteran diplomat said undiplomatically that Singaporeans are “Third World people”: “Many of our people don’t give a damn for the environment when they should. Many of our people are selfish and unkind. Just look at the way they drive.”

This was likely meant to be a soundbite to last a few years, which has generated discussions for at least one week so far.

However, Koh's point really was that moral responsibilities have to be injected into part and parcel of living one's best life in Singapore moving forward, if not wherefore art thou First World people?

In other words, there has to be an ethical dimension associated with one's actions or inaction now that we've come a bit far.

Tommy Koh's comment called out

As expected, some of the more woke amongst us naturally found fault with Koh's characterisation of Singaporeans as "Third World people".

Two letters published in The Straits Times forum page on Oct. 8 slammed Koh's use of "Third World people" and his characterisation of Singaporeans.

The more damning letter wrote that Koh's comments came off reeking of arrogance and was insulting, as it put down people in Third World countries who are undoubtedly also made up of morally upright and ethical people.

The other less argumentative letter just wanted to let it be known that Singaporeans can also be kind and considerate.

But both letters failed to address the gist of what Koh was trying to say.

Namely, some Singaporeans have a tendency of treating others poorly, as long as they can.

Which really shouldn't be happening anymore in this day and age.