

## What it takes to be politically aware

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Just because the youth got excited about the recent elections does not make them politically aware, former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew said at a dialogue with some 1,800 undergraduates at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) last night.

Asked for his thoughts on the trend of young people becoming more politically aware, he said: "To be aware of the political situation in Singapore, you have to be aware of the political divide, the way the economy is going, what opportunities there are for different groups of people.

"If you are politically aware, the votes would have been much wiser."

The session was part of the annual Ministerial Forum series organised by the NTU Students' Union.

The auditorium was packed with undergraduates from NTU, Singapore Management University and the National University of Singapore.

Mr Lee also warned against the political divide that has taken root in Singapore.

"If that political divide remains a political divide, and not a national divide where national issues are concerned, then the impact on our growth will not be very much," he said.

"But if the political divide leads to a national divide and you have constant bickering... then we just become an ordinary country."

He attributes the country's growth since its independence in 1965 to an "undivided society" that was solidly behind a "meritocratic system".

"My worry for the future is whether we will have the same national solidarity, the same desire to increase educational levels, to increase performance and having the best people in the best jobs.

"Once we veer away from the meritocratic system, our performance will drop."

PhD student Xyed Munir, 27, asked Mr Lee if he thought a younger generation will be as "appreciative or even tolerant" of the strong style of leadership used in the past, especially in the face of a "very vocal opposition".

Mr Lee said: "I think you know the answer to your question."

He added: "As Singapore grows more segmented, with more diverse education levels, you will not have the same homogenous mass of people to rally behind a single policy.

"It is a different society that we face. Therefore, political leaders will have a much more complicated job of getting society as a whole to accept a programme."

On a question about the influx of foreigners, Mr Lee said there were "grim statistics" from the Institute of Policy Studies stating that 60,000 migrants were needed a year to keep Singapore's economy young.

However, Mr Lee was quick to point out that such a large number was "politically indigestible".

The solution, he said, is to have about 20,000 migrants a year and increase Singapore's fertility rate.

He then turned to the 27-year-old PhD student who posed the question and asked about her studies, marital and dating status. She replied that she would finish her studies in two years and was unattached.

He said: "My advice is please don't waste time, it's more important and more satisfying than your PhD. I hope you get your PhD and your boyfriend."