

Q & A: On foreign workers, elitism and unhappiness

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The open-door policy [to foreign workers] is the source of some of our economic difficulties. How aggressively can we expect the Government to address them?

- **Socio-political blogger Alex Au**

We are an independent country that needs a relatively diversified economic structure. We cannot be a pure services centre like HK, which does most of its manufacturing across the border. We need a manufacturing sector, a logistics sector and we need a range of services to survive as an independent city-state. And that means we are not going to have Singaporeans in adequate numbers and with the right skills in every sector. If we want more them in construction, we have to do with less Singaporeans in other sectors.

So inherent in keeping to a diversified economic structure with a relatively small domestic workforce is that in each sector you need a varying amount of foreign workers. Then the challenge is to gradually tighten that, gradually improve the quality of foreign workers, and improve the quality of our own people at the same time. But we cannot shift to the extreme end of the spectrum where you only rely on local workers.

Our education system promotes the creation of an elite which goes against the very idea of an equal society... how do you reconcile the two?

Take my answer as random reflections rather than government policy. It is a very important question, because too much precision at too early an age does favour those who start off with more advantages. What we've been doing in recent years is moving towards some blurring of meritocracy... I do think we still have to move further in the direction of blurring the precision of scoring and placing into secondary schools. And we have to think about how we can do it without offending the sense of fairness that Singaporean parents have. If one parents' kid had 257 (PSLE score) and another parents' kid had 255 and got into the school they were competing for, the first parent gets upset. So we have to find ways of blurring this in a way that doesn't upset that sense of fairness in the Singapore system.

We live in a good society, we've done very well, but why are Singaporeans so unhappy?

- **Professor Tommy Koh**

We are going through a transition. The adjustments have been sudden not just in Singapore but everywhere else. An adjustment to a new set of economic circumstances, the fact that incomes are not going up as fast as before; and the fact that the sense of mobility that you got from the first 30 years, where there was a whole leap in living standards in each generation, that has slowed. And we have to adjust to that and find a new compact and a new understanding amongst everyone who is involved.

Secondly, we are going through a transition politically. From a very dominant, incumbent party, to more plurality, more voices and views in and out of parliament.

Over time things will settle. The underlying drivers, however, will not change - it is a very competitive world; but we also have to do more to help those at the lower end of the ladder.

Most important is to keep this as a place where people feel there is a realistic chance for them to improve over time. And I think this is one of the few places where, despite being relatively developed, we can achieve that - an upward, mobile society. And that will keep a sense of optimism about the place. And politically too, as a ruling party, we have to manage our incumbency somewhat better than we had in the past.