

Singapore: A nation of paradoxes?

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Has the government neglected nation-building while developing Singapore as a global city? Is Singapore full of paradoxes? What more can be done to help the vulnerable in society?

These questions and more were raised during a discussion at the Institute of Policy Studies' annual Singapore Perspectives conference on Monday. Twelve panelists from various industries shared their views on three major topics – a “Global City”, a “Caring Community” and the “Singapore Spirit”.

While Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng mapped out the government's plans to develop Singapore as both a global city and endearing home in his keynote address, subsequent discussions raised doubts on the possibility of doing so.

One key concern was the “cost” of nation building, with the focus on growing Singapore into a global city.

Writer and independent scholar Derek da Cunha said the apparent focus on developing a global city had “the unintended side effect of causing some fissures to the national fabric”.

For instance, bringing in more immigrants to create a cosmopolitan “buzz” put pressure on transport, housing and employment, he said.

Citing the sharp increase in casino exclusion orders and news reports of crime in the casinos, Dr de Cunda wondered if the drive to turn the Republic into the “Monaco of the East” would further entrench the underclass and lead to a widening social divide.

Chairman for the Workers' Party and Non-Constituency Member of Parliament Sylvia Lim also highlighted the “palpable sense of loss of identity among Singaporeans due to the pace of change over the last few years”.

Pointing out the contradiction in the terms “Global City” and “Endearing Home”, Ms Lim said the change in the population mix adversely impacted citizens' sense of belonging and security.

In 1990, 86 per cent of the population was local but in 2010, the figure fell to 63 per cent, she cited.

She said, “Singaporeans must always feel empowered at home”.

The government should retreat from various spheres in life and allow for others to take charge, such as in sports associations, and Singapore should celebrate political diversity, she suggested.

“We must have the confidence that as Singaporeans we will be taken care of,” she stressed, calling for a “closer look at the social safety nets”.

Some felt more should be done for the vulnerable groups, for example, by tackling the widening income gap.

Member of Parliament Denise Phua, who spoke about the needs of the low-income and the disabled, young and elderly in Singapore, called on the government to “play a leading role” so that all citizens have equal access to goods that are their “basic social entitlement”.

Everyone else can also do their part by doing more for others, she stressed.

However, chief executive of the Singapore Indian Development Association T Raja Segar pointed out, a recent survey by the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre found Singaporeans more willing to donate money than their time.

In true adversity, such as the Brisbane floods, would Singaporeans step up to help others, he asked. Those who responded said, they believed Singaporeans would.

In addressing the Singapore spirit, some speakers described it as one that looks ahead to what Singapore can be, rather than one that relied on the past. While it brings vitality and openness to society, it could also mean Singaporeans lack refinement and a stable identity, said associate editor at The Straits Times Janadas Devan.

But to director at the Theatre Training & Research Programme, T Sasitharan, “to be at once at home and always at the edge; to feel rooted and at the same time to feel constantly blown away by the wind – these contradictions are what makes us who we are.”

Mr Sasitharan, pointing to the increasing diverse demographics in Singapore, said, “Unless we find space in our hearts to include those who are different... we would no longer feel at home.”