

# SINGAPORE PERSPECTIVES 2011

Our Inclusive Society: Going Forward

**Monday, 17 January 2011**

**Raffles City Convention Centre**

## **PRESS RELEASE**

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'Developing a global city that is an endearing home with a soul.' If that is not a tall order, then what is?

It was not however too daunting an issue to grapple with for the 800 participants and diverse line-up of speakers at the Institute of Policy Studies' flagship Singapore Perspectives 2011 Conference held today at the Raffles City Convention Centre. The theme this year was 'Our Inclusive Society: Going Forward'.

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister overseeing the work of the new National Population and Talent Division, **Mr Wong Kan Seng** set the stage with his view that it is not impossible to reconcile the tensions between Singapore's liberal immigration policy to add economic ballast, and the desire to offer her residents a sense of familiarity, stability and belonging. He said that government policy will be guided by the three principles of preserving what is distinctive and unique about Singapore, by ensuring that all growth and change should benefit Singaporeans, and by nimbly making adjustments to population policy when needed to support the first two principles.

That Singapore is a global city, and an open economy is a given. The challenge is to build a home within that reality.

During the day, discussions centred on the specific challenges thrown up by being a highly competitive economy that has to be a nation at the same time. If it is good for the economy to welcome the integrated resorts and the job opportunities they represent, then what of the attending social ills and their impact on families? If it is an economic imperative that we augment the local labour force with foreigners, then what of the impact on wages of the locals and the sense of community on the ground?

Speakers reiterated time and again, in different ways, that the wealth of a nation has to be measured not by the size of its coffers but how it treats its poor and disadvantaged, the people who may be neglected or under-served behind by the formal economy. While some Singaporeans were animated by the recent Parliamentary debate on the need for a minimum wage to address the welfare of local low-skilled workers, speakers felt that more people can be mobilised to give active service to the least among us. This has to be underpinned by a sense of empathy from being able to understand their needs, and a sense of empowerment from knowing that all are able and welcome to play a part in ensuring that no one is left

behind. Open minds are also needed to challenge current policy orthodoxies and uncover creative solutions for greater social inclusion.

Speakers closely involved in community work applauded the fact that more Singaporeans are giving themselves to practical efforts at uplifting the lot of the needy – 23% of Singaporeans are involved in some form of volunteerism. It was also noted that the most generous givers are found among those who do not have much in the first place. The conference recognised that there are many leaders and members of grassroots organisations that are actively contributing to community–building. There are also many interesting stories of the spirit of generosity spilling to the region through the work of Singapore-based international organisations.

To grow this movement of ensuring that everyone feels they have a place, a home in Singapore, however requires a deeper process of uncovering and propagating Singaporeans’ sense of soul. Some in the room felt that the nation lacked soul but would fight hard to forge one. Others felt that Singaporeans had a deep sense of soul but that we had yet to recognise, articulate and celebrate it. Clearly, we can do more introspection and reflection but that will need time, the right platforms, and enough exposure to the diversity of people who inhabit this island to understand the needs.

Speakers cautioned that in doing so, we must remember not to do it in condescension but with humility and respect. **Minister Lim Boon Heng**, Deputy Chairman of the People’s Association, speaking at the final session of the conference, said that it is in the ‘micro-communities’ where local needs are identified by residents looking out for each other that the true bonds of being part of the Singapore family are formed.

How would we know when we have arrived? The values of empathy, resilience, community, a shared heritage cannot be measured by key performance indicators but they are of infinite value – they will make all the difference in turning a global city into a nation. “These can only be lived, felt and spoken of from the deepest chambers of our hearts. They cannot be mandated by policy or government, but must certainly inform public policy and our daily actions” said IPS researcher, **Dr Gillian Koh** in summing up the day’s proceedings.

More information on the conference and the conference programme can be found here

[http://www.lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/synopsis\\_p2011.aspx](http://www.lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/synopsis_p2011.aspx)

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