



Singapore Perspectives 2025 Dialogue with Minister Edwin Tong

By Joscelyn Chong

Background

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) held its annual flagship Singapore Perspectives conference on 20 January 2025.

The conference theme was “Community”, recognising that the world today is being pulled apart by political polarisation, economic fragmentation and a myriad other disruptive forces. As 2025 is also the 60th year of Singapore’s independence, the conference challenged Singaporeans to ask: what might bind us more strongly together as a people and a nation as we confront these challenges?

The final segment of the Singapore Perspectives 2025 conference comprised the dialogue with Mr Edwin Tong, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth, and Second Minister for Law. This segment was moderated by Professor Lily Kong, President of the Singapore Management University. The session began with opening remarks by the minister, followed by a question-and-answer segment.



Caption for photo: (From left to right): Mr Edwin Tong, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth; Professor Lily Kong, President of the Singapore Management University

Opening Remarks

In Mr Edwin Tong's opening remarks, he described how strength in unity and unity amidst diversity have been central pillars of Singapore's success. He also noted there had been increasing challenges along new fault lines in the world. These have polarised views and threatened the cohesions of communities. Singapore is not immune to these trends and need to find a way to navigate these trends, he added.

Mr Tong revisited the role of unity in shaping Singapore's success since its independence. After Singapore became independent, there was a plan to forge social cohesion out of a multi-ethnic Singapore. Specifically, the founding prime minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew made two key decisions that shaped the context of the Singaporean identity: an open economy and an open society. One of the first things to navigate an open economy was the adoption of the English language. This enabled Singapore to be connected and relevant to the rest of the world. Within Singapore, the plan was to create a Singapore for Singaporeans with a clear eye on protecting minorities, freedom of religion and ethnic practice.

Policies were designed to enable an openness to the world and openness to every Singaporean. This has produced exceptional outcomes based on the following principles. First, building Singapore's national identity on diverse cultural and ethnic identities; second, fostering interaction and mutual appreciation of diverse cultures; and finally, being systematic and deliberate about being impartial to all races and religions. These principles are given form and substance in the Constitution and in law, such as Article 152 to protect minorities and

special position of Malays, the Presidential Council on Minority Rights, and the Ethnic Integration Policy, as well as ground-up community efforts through the People's Association, SG Cares networks and more.

While Singapore has made tremendous strides, Mr Tong cautioned against complacency. Singapore's social cohesion could be threatened by new divisive forces. Globally, identity politics, political instability and poor economic outcomes have accentuated anti-immigrant sentiments in Europe and the United States (US). In Singapore, our total fertility rate fell below 1.0 in 2023, and failed to pick up in 2024 despite it being the Dragon Year, which traditionally sees an uptick in births. Hence, Singapore is not just ageing, but super-ageing, he said. The "super-ageing" society coupled with its all-time low fertility rate necessitate immigration for economic sustenance.

Inevitably, this will raise concerns in areas such as competition for jobs, national identity dilution and cultural conflicts. If left unaddressed, this could deepen societal divides. In addition, technological advancements, such as social media and artificial intelligence, might erode social togetherness where people tend to communicate with only like-minded people. There is no straightforward solution to these challenges, as the problem is complex, multifaceted, volatile and beyond any direct control.

However, Mr Tong believed that Singapore would continue to thrive with strong togetherness, diverse exchanges and shared goals. To do so, Singapore must build on its strong social compact and continue to embrace diversity through Singapore's traditional approach, where consistent social cohesion strengthens integration — rather than assimilation — across all segments of society. He explained the strategies that could enable concurrent cultural diversity and strong collective national identity: (i) collective societal effort where we strengthen our commitment to multiculturalism, and racial and religious harmony (e.g., the collective impact hub established by the Singapore Partnerships Office, The Majority Trust and Tote Board for agencies' collaborative solutioning); (ii) strengthening our common values and principles to encompass broader fault lines; (iii) ensuring that policies remain fair for all; (iv) intentional social mixing to create shared spaces to build networks of diverse peoples; (v) readiness to change, as seen in the repeal of Article 377A, which involved thoughtful engagements with stakeholders in understanding societal value shift; and (vi) greater appreciation for our shared history and heritage, which could be fostered through arts or sports (e.g., Harmony Games organised by religious groups and participated by teams of individuals from different religions). Mr Tong concluded by sharing his vision of a successful society — being one marked by the translation of the efforts to better Singapore today, to the benefits that the coming generations can enjoy.

Question-and-Answer Session

Q: What are some of the systems, policies, and laws that Singapore has in place that should be retained? And which of these should be reconsidered?

A: Mr Tong replied that Singapore's general framework has served us well, while from time to time, specific topical issues would need to be re-examined and evaluated. He added that it is important to hold true to values, especially openness on a societal perspective; these values will provide guidance on the policies that require retention or change.

Q: What is the next big social difference that may become a divide in the coming years, if left unchecked? Will it continue to be race and religion or will it be something else? How can we safeguard against this?

A: Race and religion will continue to stand at the top of our concerns. This is because they are deeply personal and used as a marker of identity. Mr Tong highlighted the divergence relating to age, sexual orientation and socioeconomic status. He also emphasised the increasing need for Singapore's multiculturalism approach to consider the shifting belief system and views that could shape one's identity, such as where one lived, grew up or received an education, etc.

Q: Regarding race, does the growing complexity in social and ethnic diversities warrant a need to rethink policies such as the classification of Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO)?

A: Mr Tong replied that the CMIO classification continues to be relevant today. For instance, he highlighted how the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) has been important to ensure that there is population diversity across estates in Singapore, where this diversity is based on the CMIO categories. However, Mr Tong also noted that there are circumstances where the CMIO classification presents a gap in representing one's identity — such as mixed marriages. He agreed that policies like the CMIO framework need to be constantly reviewed for their relevance or for ways to enhance them. However, at present, there is no better approach to the CMIO framework to achieve intentional social mixing.

Q: Regarding religion, is there scope for religion to be incorporated within the educational curriculum to nurture the shared understanding about different religions?

A: Mr Tong noted the benefit of learning from different religions. He also agreed that there was space to engender a deeper and stronger understanding of different religions. He emphasised that interaction with people from different religious backgrounds was key to deepening our understanding of each other. However, he noted that religion was a deeply emotional and personal choice. Teaching religious education through the curriculum in a secular fashion would be challenging, and it might not be easy to overcome the sentiments around it.

Q: How might inter-religious organisations (IROs) create spaces to hear from people who are non-religious?

A: Mr Tong explained that the programmes implemented by many religious organisations are already secular in nature. He cited temple programmes during the Chinese New Year period as an example whereby people from all religions were welcomed. He added that many IROs have educational programmes for people unfamiliar with the religion.

Q: There seems to be a transactional nature to community centres today, especially when the reception area is placed away from the entrance. How might community centres transform to better facilitate community gatherings? Would it be possible to measure returning participants as a key metric?

A: Mr Tong noted that previous designs of community centres tried to maximise the forefront spaces for prominent activities, such as commercial spaces or programmes that people could easily partake in. He added that he would consider the suggestion of engagement-related metrics.

Q: How should Singapore draw in United Nations (UN) organisations for youth participation?

A: Mr Tong replied that there are many youth-related activities by the National Youth Council. Although Singapore does not have a direct UN setup, there are many international programmes such as study trips, some of which do intersect with UN programmes.

Q: What are some safeguards to mitigate cultural dilution amidst embracing global diversity?

A: Mr Tong explained that immigration policies have sought to maintain racial proportions in Singapore. He pointed out that foreign born Singaporeans might have different perspectives, which may cause discomfort to local communities. This is not something that we should shy away from, he said; instead, there are programmes for potential candidates to introduce them to Singaporean communities. For instance, socialisation can take place through the People's Association, naturalisation committees and employer-led programmes.

Q: There are security concerns to information, such as foreign influence, and hence, there is information asymmetry when it comes to policymaking. Hence, there is a sense that policymaking is best left to government. In this context, how do we seriously and legitimately engage civil society in policymaking, in relation to community building?

A: Mr Tong acknowledged that every government has sensitive information that must be kept confidential. Nevertheless, for civil participation in policymaking to be effective, it is important to make the process iterative to get better outcomes through engagement. He cited two examples of public engagement in the policy landscape. First, the Singapore Partnerships Office that has been established to welcome people to work with the government to better Singapore. Second, he pointed to the youth panels where non-public data were shared in confidence with young people to formulate solutions. The young people were also put in teams and facilitated by personnel such as policymakers. The most salient topic will be brought to Parliament for debate.

Q: How can we do more to promote intergenerational learning and bonds through grandparents and seniors?

A: Mr Tong agree that there is value in having grandparents impart lessons and experiences. Citing his personal experience of encouraging grandparents-grandchildren interactions in his

family, he noted that grandparents could teach with different perspectives and from a different relationship. He noted that attitude is key, and this can be nudged along with staying together, such as having three generations living in an apartment and so on.

Q: Should the EIP be implemented to condominiums and landed properties, etc., given the government's belief in its role in integration? Is the absence of EIP in private estates an example that rich people experience different laws in Singapore?

A: Mr Tong did not agree that there are different rules for the rich. He noted that when it came to housing, 85% of the population live in public housing, i.e. HDB estates. They are given grants and there are avenues to nudge behaviour in the flat selection process. This is harder to achieve in private estates where there are fewer avenues to do so. Moreover, it would not be accurate to use private property as a surrogate for income.

Q: Community involvement programmes (CIPs) hours awarded for community participation might encourage a transactional benefactor-beneficiary relationship. People who use CIP for portfolio building leave the beneficiaries after one to two years. Are there better metrics to measure and encourage youth participation in the community?

A: Mr Tong agreed that youths should not be driven by CIP hours. The CIP hours set an index and benchmark for which one could do goal-setting (e.g., achieve a number of hours). The experience of having to achieve a certain number of hours expose youth to volunteering and making a difference in the community or society. The hope is that this helps the youth see value in participating, and to continue to volunteer regardless of CIP hours.

Q: Will income inequality cause different lived experiences among Singaporeans and as a result have a destabilising influence on social cohesion?

A: Mr Tong agreed that income inequality constitutes a driver that threatens social cohesion. If left unchecked, it could become a drain or drag on social cohesion. He shared that the government tries to keep income inequality as low as possible. He added that the Gini coefficient has come down over the years, but this is not the only measure. Other efforts such as social and fiscal transfer are implemented to help the lowest income group. He noted that in Singapore for every dollar of tax paid, more than a dollar of benefit is received. The ratio of return is progressively higher for the lower-income groups.

Q: The challenge for advocacy groups in getting registered as a society/company limits their funding and consequently growth potential. There is also fear among some who do not want to be seen as having dissenting views by participating in advocacy. What should be done to encourage a diversity of views?

A: Mr Tong shared that it is important to have a plurality of voices to help change for the better. He said that there should not be any fear in speaking up and offering different views, adding that working with civil society through youth panels, through the Singapore Partnership Office, People's Association, dialogues and events, are intended to make a difference and find

change. He added that change is only possible when we disagree with the default today. Hence, people must not fear coming forward to express a contrarian view, he said, but they should also be constructive and offer solutions.

Q: What is the role of private institutions and individuals in making arts and culture more accessible to the underserved communities? Additionally, how might public and private partnerships enshrine the value of inclusivity?

A: Mr Tong viewed the arts as a unique, non-threatening and organic way to bringing people together. He shared about ART:DIS, which promotes arts by disability groups and engages in outreach to people who might not be able to access the arts easily. The Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth and the National Arts Council support programmes that add value in bringing people together. These programmes do not just apply to the elderly, he noted, but to the youth and other groups as well.

[Joscelyn Chong](#) is a Research Assistant at IPS.

IPS is grateful to the following organisations for their support of IPS and Singapore Perspectives 2025:



TEMASEK



Accenture
 BinjaiTree
 Changi Airport Group
 Chevron Singapore
 City Developments Limited
 DBS Bank
 DP Architects
 EY
 Hinrich Foundation
 Housing & Development Board
 Institute of Technical Education
 JTC
 Keppel
 Khong Guan Biscuit Factory (S) Pte Ltd

LinkedIn
 Monetary Authority of Singapore
 Nanyang Polytechnic
 National University of Singapore
 PSA International
 Republic Polytechnic
 Sentosa Development Corporation
 Singapore Polytechnic
 Singapore University of Social Sciences
 Tan Chin Tuan Foundation
 The Silent Foundation
 Tsao Foundation
 Urban Redevelopment Authority
 Venture Corporation Limited

If you have comments or feedback, please email ips.update@nus.edu.sg



© Copyright 2025 National University of Singapore. All Rights Reserved.

You are welcome to reproduce this material for non-commercial purposes and please ensure you cite the source when doing so.