

## DPM Wong outlines approach to resolving contentious issues

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SINGAPORE - Singapore's way of resolving contentious issues has been to find a combination of compromise and common ground to gradually move society forward, while recognising that some issues are better set aside to be returned to at a later time, said Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Lawrence Wong.

Speaking at a dialogue with young Singaporeans aged between 18 and 30 on Wednesday, Mr Wong said there will be issues for which consensus is not easily arrived at, even with constant dialogue.

"Rather than going at it over and over again and getting everyone heated up, let's set it aside for the time being, because who knows - attitudes, mindsets might well change a few years down the road," he said. "So there is also a need for judgment, wisdom, on what we can do, how fast we can move."

Mr Wong acknowledged that this way of consensus-seeking meant that some dialogues can come across as "a little bit of a show", with the Government having decided on a direction, while dialogues that did not result in change were seen as pointless.

But the process is about understanding the costs and consequences that a decision entails and arriving at an acceptable balance, Mr Wong said as he urged against cynicism and scepticism.

DPM Wong and Senior Minister of State for Health and for Communications and Information Janil Puthucherry were speaking at the Young Singaporeans Conference 2022 at M Hotel. It was organised by the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy's Institute of Policy Studies.

The conference, which was held on Monday and Wednesday, was attended by 100 participants and held in support of the Forward Singapore exercise to forge a new social compact.

Issues that were discussed over the two-day conference included social media and the online space, environmental sustainability, as well as life priorities and values.

During a question-and-answer session, Mr Wong was asked by a civil servant how the country can move forward on issues where the debate can become unpleasant or intractable, such as the coming goods and services tax hike.

Mr Wong said that there are no easy answers, and that decision-makers need to engage the various stakeholders involved and discern where the broad middle of the population stands on an issue.

But while sense-making is useful, the Government then has to decide what the right thing to do is, and then engage, persuade and convince people on why it is a net-positive, even if it is unpopular, he said.

Mr Wong was also asked about the next steps for greater inclusivity and representation of the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) community in Singapore, such as the possibility of civil unions.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced last month during the National Day Rally that Section 377A, which criminalises sex between men, will be repealed.

Mr Wong reiterated that the Government decided to repeal S377A because there is considerable legal risk of the law being struck down in a future challenge, alongside the definition of marriage as between a man and a woman, on grounds that it is unconstitutional.

This is why it has proposed repealing S377A while taking steps to amend the Constitution to protect the definition of marriage from legal challenges.

"That's the balance that we think we are able to strike when we present this in Parliament... Before anticipating what future steps we might do, let's get past this first hurdle and see how we can get to a stage where we find a new balance that the broad majority of Singaporeans will accept," Mr Wong said.

He added: "If we can't even get through this first step without keeping our society together, don't even talk about next steps."

This is why the Government's main focus now is to ensure that those "with very strong views on both sides" can find common ground and accept this new balance.

In response to a question on how political diversity can be accommodated in Singapore's future plans, Dr Janil said that apart from differing views across political parties, there is no lack of diverse views within the People's Action Party.

He added: "Diversity is good to have, but you have to come to a resolution and find a way to get a compromise or at least chart a way forward."

Dr Janil said many of the suggestions that participants came up with - which included implementing food waste accountability, fostering mindsets in schools for taking risks, and creating an online platform for local businesses - showed that there was quite a lot of idealism and aspiration in the next generation.

"(There was) thinking not just way out of the box, but outside of the room the box is in," he said.

"That is necessary from a young audience. If young Singaporeans aren't willing or interested in pushing the envelope, that's not going to shift our agenda forward, and we do need a sense of idealism and aspiration - from all of us but particularly from the young."