

Global city push has affected quality of life: Forum speakers

Rachel Chang

The Straits Times, 18 January 2011

THE drive to be a global city has come at a price for Singaporeans and their quality of life, three speakers, including Workers' Party chairman Sylvia Lim, said at a forum yesterday.

They argued that while Singapore may have First World infrastructure, it suffers from a lack of creativity and intellectual freedom, which are fundamental to the buzz of a city that also aspires to be global in outlook.

Ms Lim said there has been a 'palpable sense of a loss of identity' among Singaporeans due to the pace of change in recent years.

The change in population mix in particular - citizens made up 86 per cent of the population in 1990; but this fell to 64 per cent in 2009 - had an adverse impact on Singaporeans and their sense of security.

She cited one resident she met on a house visit who said he did not feel that foreigners provided 'healthy' competition for locals.

Their competition had, instead, become an 'unhealthy' stress for Singaporeans.

Fellow panellist, author Derek da Cunha, cited the two integrated resorts as examples of 'global city' projects whose negative impact - like the rise of problem gambling - tore at the social fabric.

However, Employment and Employability Institute (e2i) chairman Ong Ye Kung, who was on the panel to present an alternative view, countered that the IRs created 20,000 new jobs locally, of which 12,000 were for rank-and-file workers.

Mr Ong said globalisation and its impact on Singapore society was something that 'cuts both ways': for every negative outcome cited, there is a positive corollary, such as job creation or the Marina skyline - created by the Marina Bay Sands building - and a horizon which he likened to Manhattan's or Sydney's.

Third panellist T. Sasitharan, director of the Theatre Training and Research Programme, a non-profit performing arts school, dwelt on the point that Singapore has the infrastructure of a global city, but not the freedom of political and social discourse to match.

He recalled an encounter with noted South African civil rights activist Albie Sachs in 2009 who remarked, when Mr Sasitharan introduced himself as coming from Singapore: 'Ah, you have everything except a soul.'

Mr Sasitharan said it was a 'devastating remark', but one that made him realise how deeply he felt for Singapore. 'I knew he was right but that he could not understand why so many of us stay behind to forge that soul.'

Similarly, Ms Lim said that the creativity and innovation that are a fundamental part of a global city were being held back by an 'illiberal climate' of politics here.

This was evident in how projects like the Complaints Choir - whose planned public performance in 2008 was barred by the authorities because foreigners were in the group - continue to be censored.

Mr Ong disagreed with Mr Sasitharan that Singapore had no soul: 'If we can be self-sufficient in water, have a first-class seaport and airport and have entrepreneurs, musicians and artists in our midst, how can we have no soul?'

This soul was also evident in the spirit and enthusiasm of young volunteers. 'Every time e2i has a job fair, young people come in to volunteer, to coach and work with job-seekers. This is full of soul.'

The perennial tension between the frenetic pace associated with being a global city and the sheltering stability of a nation state was cited by Mr da Cunha as a critical issue in the next general election.

The outcome of the next polls will indicate if Singaporeans have become disillusioned with the global city agenda, he said.

'It will be the most crucial election of a generation. Its results will give renewed vigour to propel Singapore's global project forward, or decelerate the process,'he added.