

IPS Conference: The future Singapore must be confident to chart own path: Heng Swee Keat

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Developed countries are not always the "gold standard" to measure Singapore against, and do not offer all the answers to the country's challenges, Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat said yesterday.

As Singapore starts on its next lap, the country must decide on its own what the best solutions are and be confident enough to chart its own path, he added.

Mr Heng was speaking at the annual Institute of Policy Studies Singapore Perspectives conference and responding to a question posed by a panellist, Ambassador-at-Large Bilahari Kausikan, on what "good politics" should be.

It was a reference to President Tony Tan Keng Yam's address to Parliament last Friday, when he spoke on the need for good politics to deliver good policies.

Mr Kausikan also suggested that the "Third World to First" narrative is outdated, as many First World countries are not doing well or are even dysfunctional.

For instance, European countries have been unable to deal with religious extremism, he said, because they have "handicapped themselves with their own ideologies".

Agreeing that Singapore should not be working blindly towards what other First World countries have achieved, Mr Heng said: "Every society must decide for itself what is it that it wants; what are the challenges that it faces; what are the circumstances; and then have the courage and conviction to know how to get there."

This, he added, can be achieved only if Singapore expands its common spaces where different groups can communicate and come to a shared understanding of Singapore's future direction.

He urged Singaporeans to start dialogues on what kind of society they hope to build.

But any dialogue must be conducted with a firm grasp of the fundamental realities that the country is small, with no natural resources except its people, and that race and religion would always need to be handled sensitively, he said.

When Mr Kausikan noted that many Singaporeans would dismiss such talk as "just another ploy to keep the People's Action Party (PAP) Government in power", Mr Heng agreed that "sometimes, people get very cynical". But, "however difficult it is to get the message across, I think that it is part of the responsibility of our leadership" to try, he said.

He added that there is enough evidence on these issues for people to determine whether "it is all a whole load of rubbish, or you can come out with fairly reasoned analysis and say, indeed, those are the facts of life".

However, there is still reason for optimism for the future. He noted the discussion's theme, *The Future Of We*, focused on what sort of future Singapore wants, and not whether the country has a future.

Mr Heng spoke at the final session of the day. The panel - which was made up of Mr Kausikan, Ambassador-at-Large Chan Heng Chee and hotelier Ho Kwon Ping - raised wide-ranging topics such as education, freedom of information, and the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

Professor Chan said many young Singaporeans are not aware of Singapore's history and asked about ways to better educate them about pioneer leaders such as Mr S. Rajaratnam and Dr Goh Keng Swee.

The two men were mentioned "only once or twice" in textbooks, she said. Hence, their significant role in the nation's founding is not widely known.

"How do we overcome this? We have to teach history objectively. Which means you talk about Lim Chin Siong when you talk about the PAP," she said, referring to the late Barisan Sosialis leader who broke away from the PAP.

Mr Ho said the future will involve an increasingly active civil society, which needs information.

Information is the lifeblood of dialogues, he added. He suggested having guidelines that would prioritise the release of information to the public, unless it deals with sensitive topics like national security.