

Man in the Street Takes a Stand

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THE Aware saga has changed the assumptions we hold about the average person in the street. Prior to the takeover, Aware saw its membership decline. But soon after the news of the coup was publicised and an extraordinary general meeting (EGM) was called to table a vote of no confidence, an unprecedented number of people applied for membership. Those who attended the EGM spoke passionately on issues like homosexuality, social inclusiveness and public accountability.

It would be safe to say that these topics are not of critical interest to the average individual in the context of a crumbling global economy. If so, why did so many people become concerned when Aware was alleged to have been hijacked by a group of conservative Christians? Or when it was suggested that children were being exposed to controversial material on sexuality?

Perhaps the recent events suggest that Singaporeans are not as apathetic as we imagine. Maybe, as individuals, we all possess a strong position on various issues but our cultural habituation has prohibited us from participating in or engaging in civil society. We assume someone else will take the helm and lead us to safety; we assume that the Government will figure a way out of any social ills; we assume that our social and private (including religious) spaces will never be intruded upon; we assume that civil society will exist and flourish with or without our support.

This inertia was shaken three weeks ago. What does it imply? Whether you are an average Jill or a member of the elite, if you care enough about an issue, you need to take ownership, speak up and engage - before someone else takes that right away from you.

Dr Leong Chan Hoong's response to Cassandra Chew and Susan Long of the Straits Times, published in "Lessons from AWARE: Standing up to be counted".