

SINGAPORE PERSPECTIVES CONFERENCE; 'Meritocracy important and govt will mitigate downsides'

Elgin Toh

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Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong yesterday affirmed the importance of meritocracy in Singapore, arguing that any downside can and would be mitigated by the Government.

Spelling out how it works, he said all would get a chance to compete fairly, and the best man would get the most difficult job and be rewarded accordingly.

But there must also be consolation prizes for the rest, he said.

"How big a consolation prize, how you define winners and losers - that is something we have to discuss," he said, adding that the definition of winners here has broadened over the years to recognise, for instance, those in arts, social service and sports.

Mr Lee acknowledged meritocracy had its weaknesses - such as a tendency to widen the income gap - but said the Government was working to mitigate these problems in two ways.

One, it was making sure the opportunity to move up remained available to all. He said: "If you make the effort, you can make the next step. You may have gone to N levels. You can work hard, you can make it to O levels, you can get to the polytechnics, you can get to university. Some people go on to do PhDs - not everybody, but the door is open."

Two, the Government would balance income distribution through wage policy.

He said: "Within Singapore, we can say... you're a school teacher, you may not be a top lawyer, but I make sure that you're also paid properly."

But society also had a role to play in changing mindsets.

In the education system, for example, he noted how difficult it was to counter the view among parents that if one's child did not get into a certain course or stream, his future was bleak.

"To persuade parents to accept that their sons or daughters can be happy in different ways, that is something which is not just what the Government says but really social attitudes and social perspectives," he said.

In an earlier session at the Singapore Perspectives Conference, Acting Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Lawrence Wong pledged that even as Singapore continued to practise meritocracy, it would guard against two negative forms of it.

These include an excessively competitive one in which individuals sought to advance their interests at the expense of others, and one with a "closed group of winners" in which advantages are ascribed by birth.

"What we want is to shape a system of meritocracy in Singapore that works for the benefit of all, and is consistent with our ideals for a fair and just society."