

Singapore working to avoid deep social divides: PM Lee

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It is developing a sense of identity among people and helping the less well-off

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said Singapore must avoid the deep social divides laid bare by the recent US presidential election and Britain's Brexit referendum. He said the Government has taken a two-pronged approach to stop such divisions here.

One is to develop a sense of identity and togetherness among the people and the other, to have policies that "make everybody know that if you're in Singapore, not everybody is equally well off, but even if you're not well off, you're not badly off".

People also need to be fairly treated, Mr Lee added, and Singapore has given a leg up to the less well-off through steps such as Workfare for low-income workers and the Pioneer Generation Package to help the elderly with their medical bills.

For workers, there is SkillsFuture to train them for the new economy.

"There is no magic formula," he said, adding that people have to work hard and governments need to have workable policies.

He was speaking to Singapore reporters on Sunday when wrapping up a five-day trip to Peru for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) Summit.

Mr Lee noted that in the United States, the Democrats dominate the cities and both coasts, while Republicans populate the Mid-west and the heartlands. With Brexit, the split was between London and the rest of the country, and also along education and income levels.

Such social divides cannot be allowed to widen in Singapore as rebuilding bridges will be very difficult, he said.

Mr Lee also urged caution in drawing comparison between the polls in Singapore and what happened in the US and Britain.

Earlier this month, US President-elect Donald Trump won by appealing to voters in the Rust Belt states such as Ohio and Michigan, who felt they had lost their jobs in the once-powerful industrial sector because of globalisation.

In June, Britons voted to leave the European Union, in part due to anxiety over immigration.

Last week, academic Gillian Koh described Singapore's 2011 General Election as a "mini-Brexit vote", as immigration was a hot-button issue during the campaign.

Asked about the comparison, Mr Lee said "there's massive difference in scale" between those two polls and the Singapore outcome. "The changes induced by globalisation, the Rust Belt problems, the uncertainty of jobs, these are real problems which people feel," he said.

They need to be addressed, but people must also "feel their concerns have been heard and have been attended to", he added.

Leaders, too, have to get people to understand that certain issues, such as technological and economic changes, are not something the Government can wish away or which are a result of a wrong set of policies, he said.

This year's summit took place amid rising anti-globalisation sentiments, and Apec leaders pledged in a statement to ensure policies "contribute in concrete terms to raising people's quality of life and enhancing social equity in the region".

Similarly, Mr Lee said at Sunday's Leaders Retreat that the fruits of globalisation can be spread more evenly by supporting small businesses, digital trade and services.

"Given the current backdrop, it is important that Apec addresses issues arising from globalisation and emphasises inclusive growth, so that people who have not directly benefited from trade are not worse off and left behind."