

## **Singaporeans can be more civic-minded, considerate, says Prof Koh**

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Veteran diplomat Tommy Koh laments that Singapore is a First World country with Third World people. Many Singaporeans lack the civic-mindedness that citizens of an advanced country should have, he said yesterday.

“I am more critical of Singaporeans than of the Government. Many of our people don’t give a damn for the environment when they should. Many of our people are selfish and unkind. Just look at the way they drive,” Prof Koh said, drawing laughter from his audience.

He was at the Singapore Bicentennial Conference, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies.

Fellow panellist, Bloomberg News editor-in-chief John Micklethwait, pointed out that meritocracy has created its own problems, both in Singapore and other cosmopolitan capital cities. In such cities, the result is “a tribe of people who are working insanely hard to keep pushing ahead”, often pumping money and resources into their children.

“That is a very good thing for your children, but it means society gets a bit harder for others to catch up, and that is one of the dilemmas of a modern country,” he said.

He recounted how a friend had attended a dinner at which none of the guests, including Singaporeans, could understand why people in the United Kingdom had voted for Brexit. “Nobody could understand why anybody had voted for Donald Trump. Nobody could understand why the protesters in Hong Kong had anything to protest about at all,” he said.

The troubling conclusion his friend came to was that the guests, though from different parts of the world, had far more in common with one another than those living a block away from them. “He worried that his children only ran into poor people when they were delivering their Internet shopping,” he said, adding that societies must find a solution to be more inclusive.

Prof Koh called for Singapore to set a poverty line and raise workers’ pay, saying top executives are paid “New York and London wages”, while the bulk of workers continue to earn Third World wages.

He noted that companies used to practise profit-sharing, with a portion of the profit distributed to all employees at the end of the year, but this had been abandoned.

The average bus worker here earns a monthly wage of \$3,600, he said. But the chief executives of the bus companies can be paid in excess of \$1 million a year, with one paid between \$1.75 million and \$2 million a year. He asked: “Is this fair? Is running a bus company rocket science?”

“There seems to be an obscene race in Singapore between our leading financial institutions and companies. The obscene race is to see who can pay the CEO more. So \$7 million not

enough; \$10 million, maybe \$20 million. Have they ever asked themselves what is the median income of the employees? What is the Gini coefficient of the company?" he asked.

Asked whether there is an alternative to capitalism, Prof Koh said the question to ask is what kind of capitalism Singapore wants.

Moral capitalism is where companies consider themselves accountable to not only shareholders but to wider society, where they care for the environment and employees, and champion gender equality and diversity, he said.

He added that he had many ideas for Singaporeans, which he will write about in his next few columns for The Straits Times.