

S'pore more 'welfarist' than other nations: Shanmugam

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Foreign and Law Minister K. Shanmugam yesterday issued a challenge for anyone to find a government that is more "welfarist" than Singapore's.

While it studiously avoids using the word, the Government substantially subsidises every aspect of a citizen's life, he said.

Speaking to an audience of activists at the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) conference on civil society, he said that primary and secondary education are practically free and a "hard cash subsidy" for housing goes to 83 per cent of the population.

On talk that the Housing Board profits off building flats, he said it has to pay market rate for the land, and this money then goes into the reserves.

Mr Shanmugam was making the point that reality often differs from rhetoric, which he said was also the case when activists charge that the Government is reluctant to engage with them.

In a dialogue moderated by Professor Tommy Koh, IPS' special adviser, Mr Shanmugam parried with activists who urged him to roll back laws that circumscribe and hobble associations here.

He defended the Political Donations Act forbidding foreign funding for gazetted associations, and said the Societies Act, which defines a society as 10 or more people, would not prohibit 10 people coming together to give out masks during the haze, for example.

Making it clear that the Cabinet wants to engage with civil society, he said: "Can the Government handle everything alone? No way. We prefer to tap into the enthusiasm of people. It is a simple fact that Singapore cannot be governed without the active participation of people and civil society."

Engagement ability invariably differs across the 100,000-strong civil service, but it has improved over the last decade and will continue to, he added.

He praised activism like the Singaporeans Against Poverty campaign spearheaded by Caritas, the Catholic Church's social service arm. It avoids asking what the Government should do, he noted, but asks Singaporeans to step up.

But Mr Shanmugam lamented the "navel gazing" that Singaporeans and activists sometimes do on issues "of secondary importance". The conference covered topics like the future of civic education, youth activism and the sustainability of the "many helping hands" approach in social aid.

Singapore society is not properly grappling with the population timebomb of an ageing demographic and low fertility, an issue of far greater magnitude and importance, he said.

But questions like "Where is your manpower for the military going to come from?" and "How are we going to design your HDB flats?" are not "sexy topics that people at IPS conferences like to think about".