

S'poreans welcome PM's call to think about the future But they want new committee for this to include broad range of views

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The Straits Times, 9 August 2012

Political observers and ordinary Singaporeans welcomed Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's call to think about the future they wanted, saying it was timely.

By inviting Singaporeans to the debate, they said, the Government was showing that it genuinely wanted to consult them on the country's future direction.

But they also stressed that a committee being set up to review policies and national philosophies should include a broad range of views, and come up with innovative ideas and solutions.

Undergraduate Ng Jing Song, 23, was one of those who hailed the questions PM Lee raised in his National Day message, such as what kind of home Singaporeans want for their children.

"Every society will have to ask those questions, but the fact that he did, showed that it's not just a government-directed approach - he wants to consult us," he said.

Nominated MP Eugene Tan also said that by addressing divisive issues like immigration and social inclusiveness, PM Lee showed that he was paying attention to the hot-button issues preoccupying Singaporeans.

"These are the issues that have provoked, enraged, and troubled Singaporeans into thinking about what makes us special," he said.

But observers that *The Straits Times* spoke to also wanted to see more come out of the committee to be chaired by Education Minister Heng Swee Keat.

CIMB Research executive director Song Seng Wun said that it should address younger Singaporeans' needs and expectations, while political scientist Gillian Koh suggested that it try to break new ground in coming up with novel solutions to contemporary challenges.

"The younger ministers will be expected to move well beyond commonly understood and accepted policy paradigms," she said.

Sociologist Paulin Straughan expressed hope that the committee would consult a broad range of Singaporeans, and not just those from the establishment.

"It's very hard for us to think outside the box, when we ourselves are grown in the box," she said.

But some suggested that even if the committee ultimately concluded that Singapore need not depart from its current fundamentals, the exercise in soul-searching in itself would be useful.

It could reaffirm core values such as meritocracy and multiracialism, they said, or provide a chance to unite an increasingly complex and polarised society.

"Singaporeans should not be afraid of opposing differing points of view, but we must have something bigger, better that unites everyone above all," said doctoral student Syed Munir, 28.

But he did not have an answer for what that unifying factor was, adding: "What is it?"