

Tommy Koh laments that Singapore is a First World country with Third World citizens

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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 on Tuesday (Oct 1).

"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 speaking at the Singapore Bicentennial Conference, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies. It was held at Raffles City Convention Centre and ended on Tuesday.

During the dialogue, which was moderated by Straits Times editor and editor-in-chief of Singapore Press Holdings English/Malay/Tamil Media Group Warren Fernandez, Prof Koh and Bloomberg News editor-in-chief John Micklethwait both highlighted areas in which Singapore society can improve.

Mr 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.

Professor Tommy Koh speaking during the Singapore Bicentennial Conference on Oct 1, 2019. In his speech, he acknowledged that times have changed significantly since the 1960s, when Singapore's founding leaders mobilised people and pushed through visi

The troubling conclusion that his friend came to was that the dinner guests - even though they came from different parts of the world - had far more in common with each other than others 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 the wages of workers, noting that there is often a vast pay gap between a company's top executives and its rank and file employees.

Responding to a question on whether there is an alternative to capitalism, he said the right question to ask is what kind of capitalism Singapore wants.

Moral capitalism is where companies consider themselves accountable to not only shareholders but to the wider society, where they care for the environment and take good care of 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 ST.

"I love Singapore. I would die for Singapore. But are we a perfect people? We are not," said Prof Koh, who turns 82 next month.

"But I believe that we can always be better and in the remaining years of my life, I want to dedicate my time, energy to making Singapore an even better place, and Singaporeans an even better people," he added.