

US Capitol siege points to social, economic issues

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The protesters who stormed the United States' Capitol were part of a broad middle class that has, like in many advanced economies, seen its standard of living stagnate, said Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam.

The incident points towards a wider social and economic fact, he noted yesterday.

"When people are stuck in the same place for a long time, they get very anxious about relative positions - how they stand relative to those who are catching up from below, as well as how they stand relative to those who are further up the ladder from them," he said at the Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspectives conference.

In Singapore, it is therefore important to ensure that the "moving escalator" takes everyone up and allows for an exchange of places, added Mr Tharman, who is also Coordinating Minister for Social Policies.

"That allows for more social mobility, without people feeling deeply anxious."

He was responding to an earlier point made by American economics professor Tyler Cowen, another panellist at the same forum on jobs and skills.

Professor Cowen had said it was a mistake to consider the Capitol protesters stupid, given their ability to organise themselves.

"The violence is a problem, the riot is a problem... but the biggest problem behind all that is that we have a big chunk of our labour force that cannot self-organise with a time horizon any longer than a few hours," he added.

"The problem is that the future for them is not promising. Civil unrest is one offshoot of that, but it is not the only one."

For the Singapore Government, ongoing efforts to encourage entrepreneurship, match job seekers with the right jobs and push Singaporeans to upgrade their skills are aimed at ensuring the broad middle of society does well, said Mr Tharman.

"I am not trying to give an explanation for a mob raiding the Capitol, but I am pointing to a broader economic and social fact and what we must avoid," he added.

"We have got to ensure that the broad middle in society is doing well, feels at ease and is willing to support policies and strategies that strengthen solidarity, including doing more to help those who are at the bottom."