

Wanted: Set of ideals and values to unite Singapore

Ministers give take on how national consensus can be reproduced

Rachel Chang

The Straits Times, 27 January 2015

DEPUTY Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean recalled that as a young boy, he would correct his grandmother when she used the phrase "We Chinese" in Teochew.

"I would say, 'No, we are Singaporeans,' and she would think I was being rude," he said yesterday of the early days in the development of a national identity in newly independent Singapore.

Speaking to 900 participants at the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) annual Singapore Perspectives conference, he said that in those days, the "cauldron of crisis" produced a united Singapore from people of different races, religions and languages.

"There was a consensus that we needed to do things together, that each of us has to invest something to create Singapore and not just fight for our own factional interests," he added.

Nearly 50 years later, how a national consensus can be reproduced was a recurrent theme for much of a two hour-long question-and-answer session that Mr Teo and Social and Family Development Minister Chan Chun Sing had with participants. The issue also featured at the conference.

The dialogue, moderated by IPS director Janadas Devan, was the last session in a day-long programme which featured speakers such as veteran diplomat Bilahari Kausikan and former government chief economist Tan Kong Yam.

Mr Chan said countries defined national identities in one of two ways: an "exclusive, backward-looking" attitude which emphasised shared histories, languages and cultures; and a second that was an "inclusive, forward-looking" attitude centred on shared ideals and values.

At 50 years of nationhood, Singapore's challenge is to find a balance, he said: "We need something from the past to anchor us, but we also need to ask ourselves what is the set of ideals that unite us and allow us to draw in fresh perspectives to go forward?"

Both Mr Chan and Mr Teo recognised the increasing diversity in Singapore, be it of lifestyles or of political views.

There can be an exchange of views, but Mr Teo said there must concurrently also be political maturity to recognise that in the end, "the Government has to decide what to do" and that after the discussions, the country should move on and go ahead.

Mr Chan saw the route to consensus amid diversity as the individual's decision to "put the greater good and future of our society ahead of our preferences and desires". "It's easy to say but not easy to do," he acknowledged.

And his interactions with Singaporeans illustrated this. For instance, those who missed a cut-off point in a government scheme - whether the income ceiling for family subsidies or an age cap for the Pioneer Generation Package - often approached him to seek an expansion of schemes so they could be included.

He also recounted a discussion with a group who urged him to do more for middle-class citizens like themselves.

But when he asked how many among them paid income tax, all of them raised their hands. Only the top one-third of income earners here pay income tax.

Thus, these Singaporeans were at the high end, if at all, of the middle-class range.

"So sometimes I think we need to have a more honest conversation with ourselves," Mr Chan said. "How do we organise our society to really do more for those with less? And we have to be frank with ourselves about whether we are those with less."

Both he and Mr Teo emphasised that even as more and younger Singaporeans hanker for a new national narrative, certain imperatives of Singapore's existence cannot be ignored or compromised.

Mr Chan said these were the need for Singapore to remain economically viable and globally relevant; taking care of the country's security and independence; and keeping society together.

Singapore started out with far less than what it has today, and it was important, going forward, to pull together as a people, have a shared perspective, put aside personal preferences, enlarge the common space and do more for those who have less, he said.