

## **Winning The Race Issue: A Few More Laps To Go**

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***The Straits Times***, 21 September 2013

After 50 years of nation-building, with multiracialism as a main tenet, a recent survey is a reminder there is still some way to go before racial relations get anywhere near the ideal enshrined in the Pledge. But how much has Singapore progressed? And what can be done to move ahead?

DAYS before a Chinese opera show to mark the Mid-Autumn Festival in Boon Lay constituency last weekend, grassroots volunteers spent hours translating the Teochew, Hokkien and Cantonese lyrics into English.

They subtitled the show so that non-Chinese-speaking residents could enjoy it, too.

Acting Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Lawrence Wong cited the opera translation to Insight to show the importance of being mindful of others who might not share one's culture or language.

While there are many aspects of race relations to be pleased about, there are also potential problem areas that could stir the mix, going by the recently released findings of a survey by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and OnePeople.sg.

Mr Wong said: "The results show that we should not be complacent - we need to continue to work hard."

Even as he acknowledged that being a majority race was a factor to bear in mind in findings about the Chinese - respondents were less receptive to other races - he said more could be done to highlight diversity issues to them. He stressed that he did not think the Chinese were less tolerant though, just not as aware.

Insight delves into the findings on a sensitive subject close to the heart of what it means to be a nation and Singaporean.

### ***Bouquets And Brickbats***

JUDGMENTS of whether Singapore has cause to celebrate or to bemoan half a century of efforts to both encourage and enforce tolerance and acceptance among its population of different races, languages and religions, still seem to depend to a large extent on who is doing the assessing.

This is to be expected since race itself is a contested concept, and there is no one scientific, universally accepted way to measure the state of inter-racial ties.

Over the years, there have been various surveys to gauge perceptions and sentiments but the researchers behind the recent IPS and OnePeople.sg survey are perhaps the first to state at the outset that they plan to repeat their poll in future so as to track and analyse the direction in which race relations are moving.

This survey of 4,000 by a think-tank and a racial harmony advocacy group found that while a majority of Singaporeans believe it is good that the country is made up of people from different racial groups, they did not always live out this belief in everyday life.

One way to put the findings in perspective is to benchmark them against what citizens of other multiracial societies have to say. Not many countries have populations that are as mixed as Singapore's. However, the United States provides some basis for comparison in being both an immigrant society and a First World country that is proud to see itself as being inclusively multiracial.

Some 60 per cent of respondents believed Singapore was free from racial and religious tension.

Less than 10 per cent of minorities felt they were treated worse than other races in hospitals, schools, social service agencies, at the courts and by the police. The lack of discrimination in the public sphere seems to be a definite area of strength for Singapore.

By comparison, in the US, a Pew Research survey conducted last month found that some 70 per cent of African American respondents felt they were treated less well than white Americans by the police. About 47 per cent also said they had been discriminated against in getting health care.

Yet, in inter-marriages, Singaporeans lagged behind. A Gallup poll shows 87 per cent of Americans are supportive of marriages between blacks and whites.

Respondents to the IPS- OnePeople.sg survey were generally not as comfortable with inter-racial marriages, with 55 per cent of non-Malays saying they were comfortable with marrying Malays, and 71 per cent of non-Chinese being comfortable marrying Chinese, for example.

### ***Up Close And Impersonal?***

OVERALL, the picture that emerges is that while Singaporeans are generally open to other races in the public sphere, this attitude does not always extend to the private space.

This has been a consistent finding of race surveys here through the years. In the IPS-OnePeople. sg survey, nine in 10 accepted colleagues and neighbours of a different race, but fewer were willing to marry someone or welcome an in-law of another race.

While 80 per cent said they were comfortable with a friend of another race, only 46 per cent reported actually having a close friend of another race.

Dr Mathew Mathews from IPS, the principal investigator in the study, put this down to the gap between knowing what is right, and actually putting it into practice.

To close this gap, it is important for Singaporeans to take a bigger stake in Singapore's racial harmony, said Mr Wong, who also chairs the National Integration Council. His ministry is getting young people to run Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles (IRCCs), which are grassroots groups that help people settle into their community.

More than a third say that in climbing the corporate ladder, minorities - namely Indians and Malays - have a harder time getting to the top.

Former Nominated MP Zulkifli Baharudin sees these results as "hard truths".

"Now that we know it, we need to have an honest discussion about them," he said.

One way to move forward may be to stop seeing race as the bogeyman. Noted Nanyang Technological University sociologist Kwok Kian Woon: "It's not in each and every case that a 'threat' will play out according to our worst fears."

Mr Teo Ser Luck, Mayor of North East District and a Minister of State, recounted to Insight what he saw last week when a fire broke out at a flat in Sengkang.

"I saw neighbours of different races taking care of one another, nobody really cared whether they were Chinese or Indian or Malay," he said.

"That's being colour-blind."