

‘Don’t let political divide turn into divided society’

Lee Kuan Yew warns that Singapore must not veer away from meritocratic system

Teo Xuanwei and Ng Jing Ying

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SINGAPORE — Even as he acknowledged that a political divide “has already happened” in Singapore, Mr Lee Kuan Yew warned that this must not lead to a divided society because that will hit the Republic’s performance and growth.

Citing how a national divide has seen “constant bickering” between political camps in the West, such as the United States, France and Germany, the former Minister Mentor and current senior adviser to the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation said the Republic will become “just like another ordinary country with the same problems” should a similar situation develop here.

Mr Lee, who answered more than 10 questions from undergraduates in a 45-minute dialogue held at the Nanyang Technological University last night, stressed that the meritocratic system that Singapore has always subscribed to — and which has seen the Republic’s per capita income consistently stay higher than its neighbours since Independence in 1965 — has to stay.

He said: “So my worry about the future is whether we’ll have the same national solidarity, the same desire to increase educational levels and increase performance, and having the best people in the best jobs or holding the most important jobs. Once we veer away from that meritocratic system, our performance will drop.”

Mr Lee also noted that a problem the Government faces now is in drawing up policies that are “homogeneous and appeals to all”, as increasing education levels here have led to a more segmented society.

He was responding to a question from a School of Biological Sciences doctorate student about whether he thinks young people now can accept a “strong style of leadership” that might be needed to drive the transformation of Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has envisioned.

Noting that it makes no difference whether the population is receptive, Mr Lee said: “As Singapore grows more segmented, with more diverse educational levels, you will not have the same homogeneous mass of people to rally behind a single policy. What’s good for the middle income will be seen by the lower income as unfavourable to them. What’s good for the higher income will be resented by the middle income.”

Mr Lee noted that the profile of the population has changed from the time he was leading the country, where the number of university graduates made up at most 10 per cent compared to the current 50 per cent.

“So it’s a different society that we face and therefore the political leaders will have a much more complicated job of getting the society as a whole to accept programmes which are segmented to meet the needs of the various strata of society,” he added.

Another issue that was brought up during the dialogue was the impact of the influx of foreigners, where another doctorate student asked Mr Lee on his thoughts on ways to

promote a sense of belonging among citizens and building up social cohesiveness in the next decade.

While he acknowledged the need for cohesiveness and the assimilation of new citizens, Mr Lee highlighted the rapidly ageing population as his worry.

With birth rates standing at 1.01 now, the Institute of Policy Studies had proffered the “grim statistics”, in Mr Lee’s words, of the need for 60,000 migrants every year to keep the economy viable.

This figure, however, was “political indigestible”, Mr Lee noted. “20,000 maybe; 25,000 at a stretch, but certainly not 60,000,” he added.

But the reality is that Singapore is heading the way of Japan, where the population is shrinking and aging, he said.

Mr Lee felt the falling birth rate is the result of two reasons: Women getting educated and entering the workforce because couples find the cost of starting a family too high; and high housing costs.

Addressing the student who posed the question — a single 27-year-old who is two years away from getting her doctorate — Mr Lee quipped to rapturous applause: “My advice is, ‘Please don’t waste time’. It’s more important and more satisfying than your PhD. Good luck to you, I hope you get your PhD and your boyfriend.”