

Govt Can Do Better Job of Communicating Value of Working With Foreigners: Heng

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Today, 29 January 2014

SINGAPORE — The Government can do a better job of communicating to Singaporeans the value of staying open as an economy, said Education Minister Heng Swee Keat yesterday as a survey by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) showed that there is growing perception of prejudices across nationalities, compared to five years ago.

Responding to a question on what practical steps could be taken to breach the divide between residents and new immigrants, Mr Heng told the audience at an IPS conference that assimilation is an organic process that takes time. “When the numbers are too large, it is natural to feel a little overwhelmed and to feel that, ‘Gee, I’m surrounded by people who seem very alien’. Therefore, it is important for us to calibrate the inflow (of new

immigrants) carefully,” he said. Mr Heng added: “We need to do a better job of explaining the value of staying open, the value of working with people from different countries, cultures, different groups.”

He also acknowledged that certain practices, such as preferential treatment at the workplace towards a worker of a certain nationality instead of looking at merit, could cause Singaporeans to feel aggrieved. But Mr Heng felt the Manpower Ministry’s Fair Consideration Framework can help keep an eye on firms’ human resource practices when it kicks off in August.

At the conference earlier yesterday, the IPS had presented findings from a survey on race, language and religion, which found that there was a growing perception of prejudices across nationalities compared with five years ago, even as comfort levels across race and religion appear to have remained largely unchanged. These findings were made based on responses from 4,131 Singapore residents, who were surveyed between December 2012 and April last year.

Some 31.2 per cent of respondents had felt that there was “much or much more” prejudice based on nationality, compared with other aspects such as racial, gender or religious prejudice. About 70.6 per cent of the respondents also felt that the government is responsible for racial and religious harmony in Singapore. However, only 45.8 per cent of them felt that the authorities have done well to improve the integration of new immigrants here.

When asked why this is so, IPS senior research fellow Mathew Mathews said Singaporeans may expect the State to continue to be a mediator given its prior success with issues such as race and religion. “People have a lot more expectation, just like how we dealt with race or religion, everything was so well-orchestrated, (so they feel that) immigrant issues will be equally taken care of quickly,” Dr Mathews, who headed the survey, added.

But while matters concerning race and religion could be “managed much better” using a top-down approach previously, Dr Mathews said it would be “very much difficult” for the State to use a top-down approach now. “They do have to get the support of the community, to deal

with the fact that people do share their sentiments in other places like the Internet,” he added. The same survey also found that Singaporeans — regardless of religion — remain largely conservative when it came to issues such as same-sex marriage or having children out of wedlock.

During the hour-long dialogue, Mr Heng had suggested three approaches on how the country can navigate the differences that may arise from time to time. First, he said people should learn to “appreciate the nature of differences” in areas such as social norms, race and religion, and ensure they do not divide the population. Second, Mr Heng said differences should become a source of “creative and productive strength” instead of

being a divisive force. He further pointed out that in managing differences, people must understand that not all differences “can be settled once and for all”. “Despite our difference, we must always seek to find common causes, so that we can enlarge our common space and build trust (between each other),” Mr Heng said.

At the day-long conference, panellists had also addressed topics on religiosity and the furore over British expatriate Anton Casey’s comments about taking public transport.

In his opening remarks, IPS Executive Director Janadas Devan said the levels of hatred seen in incidents such as Mr Casey’s have unearthed a “frightful” reaction. While Mr Casey’s remarks were “oafish”, Mr Janadas said, violent expressions, including death threats, should not be supported. Mr Janadas added: “Hatred of the foreigner, xenophobia, are even now reshaping the politics of many developed countries, including in Europe, in Scandinavia, where we are seeing a growth of extreme right-wing, sometimes neo-fascist parties. Do not assume this cannot happen here.”