

Let's agree to disagree on gay rights: PM Lee

Tan Weizhen

Today, 29 January 2013

Reiterating that Singapore society is not likely to come to a conclusion on gay rights, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong signalled yesterday that the status quo will remain — and his position on Section 377A of the Penal Code, which criminalises sex between men, still stands.

Speaking at the Singapore Perspectives conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies, Mr Lee was asked by a participant how the fact that the Republic is a secular country reconciles with “an old and archaic law that nearly discriminates against a whole (group) of people”.

In response, Mr Lee noted that in countries that do not criminalise homosexuality, “the struggles don’t end”. He cited the example of recent demonstrations in Paris by supporters and detractors of gay marriage.

“Why is that law on the books? Because it’s always been there and I think we just leave it,” said Mr Lee, adding that he had explained his decision in 2007 to retain Section 377A.

Mr Lee also brought up the issue of gay rights — which has come under the spotlight again recently — in response to a question from actress Janice Koh, who is also a Nominated Member of Parliament.

Ms Koh asked whether there is space for public discussions on issues that are potentially polarising.

She noted that such discussions could help build a more resilient society.

Citing the example of gay rights, Mr Lee said: “These are not issues that we can settle one way or the other, and it’s really best for us just to leave them be, and just agree to disagree. I think that’s the way Singapore will be for a long time.”

He added that the “conservative roots” in society do not want to see the social landscape change.

Other matters that remain sensitive — although less so these days — are issues of race and religion, Mr Lee said: “We discuss many things openly now, which in the past we would have hesitated to do.

“How our different religions state perspectives and views, how our different races perform in school or how successful they are. But to think that you can take your hands off and just leave it, I think it’s very unwise,” he said.

In response to one of the participants who brought up how Muslim girls are not allowed to wear tudungs in mainstream schools — an issue that grabbed the headlines about a decade ago — Mr Lee said: “You may say it’s external, it’s not important but these small symbols can cause people to ... cluster separately and integrate less.”

He added that Singapore has made progress over the past decade with regards to having mutual respect in a multiracial society — as the participant put it.

Mr Lee said: “But at the same time, religion is a very important aspect of the lives of many Singaporeans — I think more so today than 30 or 40 years ago.”