

Netizens ask Edwin Tong to define ‘constructive’ amid comments on Govt embracing ‘plurality in voices’

At the IPS conference, Minister Edwin Tong stressed the importance of “plurality in voices,” asserting that dissent should foster constructive change. However, netizens questioned his definition of “constructive” due to the government’s use of POFMA against opposing views.

The Online Citizen, 21 January 2025

SINGAPORE: At the Institute of Policy Studies’ Singapore Perspectives 2025 conference on 20 January, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Edwin Tong highlighted the importance of having “plurality in voices” while clarifying that dissenting views must align with the broader societal context and aim for constructive change.

He stressed that advocacy and alternative viewpoints are welcome, provided they contribute positively to societal progress and maintain a constructive approach.

However, netizens have questioned Tong’s definition of “constructive” and expressed skepticism about whether the government genuinely embraces dissenting views.

Some pointed to the use of the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) against individuals or groups expressing views contrary to the government’s stance as evidence of this contradiction.

Tong Emphasises “We-First” Mindset to Balance Cultural Diversity and National Unity

During Tong’s closing speech, he stressed the importance of fostering a collective [“we-first” mindset](#), encouraging diverse skills, perspectives, and aspirations for Singapore’s continued success.

He also called for a pragmatic and purposeful approach to social integration, highlighting the need for space to allow diverse cultures to flourish while maintaining a strong sense of national unity.

Quoting former Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Tong reiterated that Singapore aims for integration, not assimilation, where no race or culture is forced to conform to others.

“Our aim is integration, not assimilation, no race or culture in Singapore is coerced into conforming with other cultures or identities, let alone that of the majority.”

AWARE’s Corinna Lim Highlights Challenges of Advocacy and Fear of Dissent in Singapore’s Civil Society

Corinna Lim, Executive Director of the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), later raised concerns with Minister Tong about the challenges faced by individuals and groups involved in advocacy, as well as the impact on civil society in Singapore.

“We’ve heard from some of our friends who are doing advocacy that it’s very difficult to register themselves, either as a society or as a company. They could be delayed for a year or not get registered at all,” Lim shared, highlighting how this hinders their growth, as funding often depends on formal registration.

Lim also noted that social service agencies with valuable on-the-ground experience often hesitate to engage in advocacy. These agencies fear being perceived as dissenting or adopting controversial stances, even though they possess insights that could benefit civil society.

“And they ask us, ‘How come you can do it?’ And I’m like, ‘It’s okay in Singapore.’” she added.

“Contrary Views Welcome, but Must Be Constructive and Solution-Oriented,” Says Tong

In response, Tong emphasised that advocacy and dissenting views are acceptable, highlighting that Lim’s open participation in the conference demonstrated that advocacy can be conducted without fear.

“I’m sure you are not in fear, and I’ve known you for so many decades, you know, it won’t spook you. And I think this is the way in which we would like to progress as a society.”

“We do want to see a plurality of voices, but it’s also got to be seen in the context. It’s not just, according to a contrarian voice for the sake of being contrarian.”

He further elaborated, “It’s got to, as I said earlier, fit into the entire compact. It’s got to also be seen in the context of other multifaceted and interconnected features that progress.”

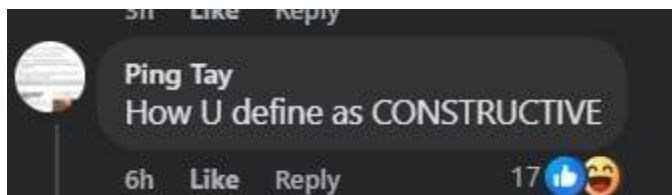
Tong underscored his appreciation for views that drive positive societal change.

“If you are able to come and offer a view that helps us to move the deal, allows us to reflect on change or what we can do better, and how we can maybe be reorganising our social service sectors, which you mentioned, so that we can encompass and serve in all the spectrum of beneficiaries, yes, of course, certainly I don’t see why anyone should be afraid of speaking up...”

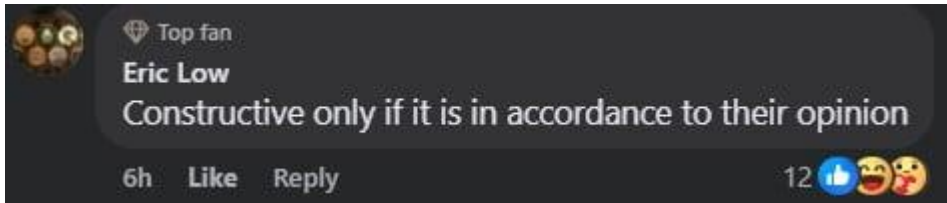
“So by definition, I really have no difficulty with people coming forward and expressing a contrary view, but also being constructive and offering a solution,” he said.

Netizens Question Government’s Tolerance for Dissent and Seek Clarity on Tong’s Definition of “Constructive”

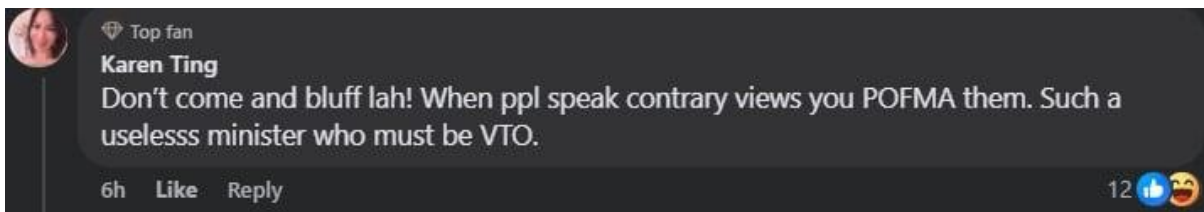
However, [comments on Mothership’s Facebook page](#) revealed skepticism regarding the government’s tolerance of dissenting views, with some seeking further clarification on Edwin Tong’s definition of a “constructive” view.



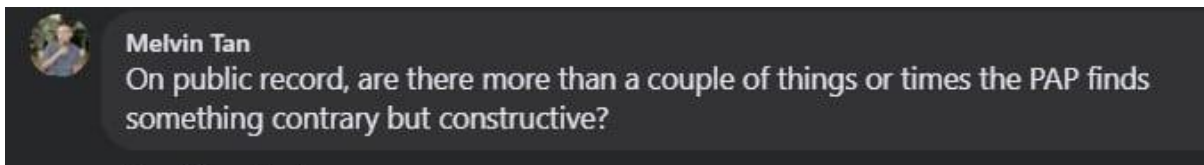
One comment mocked the idea that a view is only considered “constructive” when it aligns with the government’s opinion.



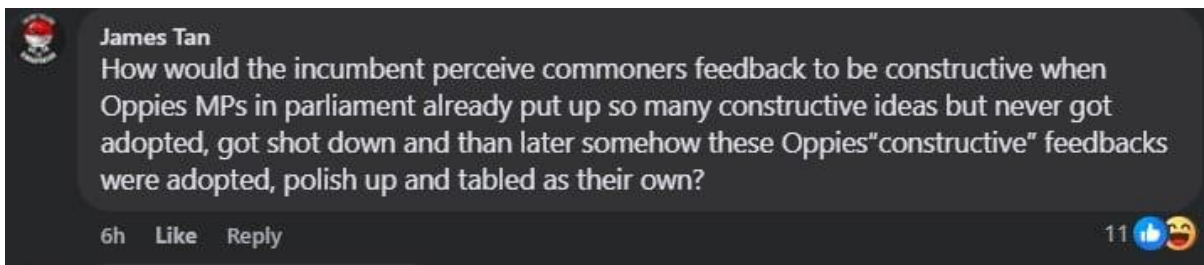
Another criticised the use of the [POFMA](#) against individuals expressing opposing views, suggesting that such actions contradict claims of openness.



Some questioned whether there have been any instances on public record where the PAP has truly embraced contrary views as constructive.



A user also criticised the government for rejecting numerous constructive ideas from opposition MPs, only for these ideas to later be adopted, polished, and presented as their own.



Meanwhile, a netizen expressed appreciation for Corinna Lim's insightful question to the minister about the fears faced by those advocating for women's rights in Singapore and the impact these fears have on civil society.

