

Minister's speech on race sends right signal but some policies worth second look: Pritam Singh

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Finance Minister Lawrence Wong's recent speech on race and racism in Singapore sends the right signals, and the minister's call for people to educate and help each other understand differences is an important one that transcends politics, said Leader of the Opposition Pritam Singh in a Facebook post yesterday.

But certain policies, such as the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP), which sets racial quotas on flat ownership within Housing Board estates, as well as the group representation constituency (GRC) system, are worth a second look, the Workers' Party (WP) chief said.

Mr Singh was responding to Mr Wong's speech and the responses he gave to questions during a forum on race organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies on Friday.

He noted that a significant part of Mr Wong's speech looked back at longstanding People's Action Party (PAP) policies, and that the minister's acknowledgement that not all agree with these policies was "particularly noteworthy".

"The Ethnic Integration Policy for public housing has bothered my colleagues and I in the Workers' Party for specific reasons," said Mr Singh.

"Over the years, we have heard our fair share of feedback from minorities of all races having to lower the price of their flats to effect a sale. Minorities bear a direct and real financial burden in the name of the EIP."

He said Mr Wong's tone and his acknowledgement of the problems that stem from the EIP go "much further than any parliamentary pronouncement on the matter by the Government" in his recent memory.

Mr Singh also highlighted related issues such as the tendency for "bunching" of minorities to occur on the lower floors of HDB blocks in spite of the EIP, as well as the role race plays in policies on national schools and institutions like national service.

He added that the EIP is just one out of a number of available policy options to mitigate the problem.

"As it is, the inequity the EIP engenders for some minority Singaporeans is real, distorts the market and has serious economic consequences."

Mr Singh also took aim at the GRC system, which Mr Wong defended in his speech.

The opposition leader said the PAP's argument that GRCs ensure a minimum number of minority representatives in Parliament is "elegant in theory, but unconvincing in practice".

The scheme began with three-member GRCs but this was expanded to allow up to six members, before the maximum size was cut back to five members in last year's general election, Mr Singh noted.

He also cited instances where the redrawing of constituency boundaries was seen as having benefited the PAP. "See how Fengshan became an SMC (single-member constituency) and was absorbed back into East Coast GRC within one election cycle?

"And who can forget Joo Chiat SMC of 2011? Why? One cannot help but to conclude that in the case of GRCs, minority representation is a Trojan horse for the PAP's political objectives."

Mr Singh said the WP has made proposals that are aimed at addressing these issues, such as moving the Electoral Boundary Review Committee out of the purview of the Prime Minister's Office.

He also said it is worth questioning whether the majority of Singaporeans today will inevitably vote along racial lines.