

Race dialogues should deepen cross-cultural understanding Care should be taken to approach matter in ways that avoid causing defensiveness: Lawrence Wong

Yuen Sin

The Straits Times, 26th June 2021

People should speak up about race and be prepared to have uncomfortable conversations about the topic, Finance Minister Lawrence Wong said yesterday.

But at the same time, those advocating for change should be conscious about how they approach the matter, and do so in ways that deepen cross-cultural understanding, instead of causing defensiveness and suspicion, he added.

In a keynote address at a forum on race, where he offered three suggestions to improve the country's multiracial model, Mr Wong made clear he was not saying that Singaporeans should refrain from voicing their unhappiness, or that minorities should stop talking about the prejudices they experience.

"On the contrary, we should be upfront and honest about the racialised experiences various groups feel, and deal squarely with them," he said at the forum organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

"But we should not insist on maximum entitlements and rights for our respective groups, construe every compromise as an injustice that needs to be condemned or put the worst interpretation on every perceived slight or insensitivity," he cautioned.

Care has to be taken in discussing such issues, he said. If one group jostles aggressively to assert its identity and rights over others, it will not take long before other groups feel put upon, and start to jostle back.

He pointed to other countries, where one side uses identity politics to push its cause, which invariably emboldens another to up the ante and make greater demands.

"We end up fuelling our worst tendencies - our tribalism, hostility and vengefulness," he said. "If we go down this path, insisting on differences over commonality, minority groups will not win, and the outcome will be most unhappy for the majority community too."

In discussing matters of race, different groups should also expand the space for agreement, not narrow it, as well as appeal to the "better angels" in all instead of instigating a "them versus us" dynamic, he said.

Mr Wong also called on the majority community to do more and take the extra step to make their minority friends, neighbours and co-workers feel comfortable.

"Treat others in the way you would like to be treated, and by your actions, teach your children to do the same. Remind those among your family members or friends who may slip up from time to time," he said.

At the same time, minorities have also reciprocated by recognising that the majority community has legitimate needs and concerns, he added.

Noting that people sometimes discuss "Chinese privilege" in Singapore, he stressed it is important to recognise the Chinese community in Singapore is not monolithic.

The term "Chinese privilege" is adapted from the concept of "white privilege" used in the United States, where privilege gives someone dominance in a society because of identity markers such as one's race or sex.

"There may well be biases or blind spots that the Chinese community should become aware of and rectify," he acknowledged.

At the same time, he said, there remains an entire generation of Chinese Singaporeans who are more comfortable in Chinese than English, and who consider themselves at a disadvantage in an English-speaking world.

"They feel that they have already given up much to bring about a multiracial society: Chinese-language schools, Nanyang University, dialects and so on. 'What do you mean by 'Chinese privilege'?' they will ask, for they do not feel privileged at all," said Mr Wong.

Making the point that Singapore's policies on race are not cast in stone, the minister added that the Government will continue to engage widely on the issue.

"For any policy - be it GRC, ethnic integration policy, self-help groups or Special Assistance Plan schools - we continually ask ourselves: What is it that we are trying to achieve? Is the policy still relevant today? Can it be further fine-tuned or improved?" he added.

The Government is convinced that it must build an ever more perfect multiracial society, Mr Wong said. "Even when some of our compatriots fall short, or neglect to play their part in this vital national project, let's see them as fellow citizens to be brought along, not adversaries to be shouted down or cancelled out."