

S'pore has to keep working to improve multiracial society, majority should be sensitive to minorities' needs: Lawrence Wong

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SINGAPORE - Singapore's multiracial society is a work in progress, and all races have to make efforts to accommodate and engage one another in a spirit of trust and compromise.

Making this point in an impassioned speech on the state of race relations Friday (June 25), Finance Minister Lawrence Wong added that the Government will continue to engage Singaporeans and update its policies on race and racial harmony.

"No community has gotten everything it wanted, but collectively, we have achieved more together than what we would have otherwise by just focusing on our individual agendas," he said at a forum on race organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

In his speech, he set out Singapore's philosophy of multiracialism and gave suggestions to improve its system, noting a delicate balance has been struck through mutual compromise thus far.

He noted recent worrying incidents that have caused Singaporeans to consider the state of its racial harmony. The cases, which were highlighted on social media, have raised awareness of racism, and opened up conversations about how Singaporeans can hold themselves to higher standards on this issue.

Outlining three ways that Singapore can keep working at multiracialism, Mr Wong stressed the role that the majority community has to play by being sensitive to the needs of minorities, as it is harder to be a minority in any multiracial society.

This applies to all aspects of daily life, he added, highlighting those who face discrimination when looking for a job, potential tenants who learn that landlords do not prefer their race, and those who have to deal with stereotypes about their race or insensitive comments.

"These things do happen, not always, and perhaps not even often, but sometimes. And when they do happen, they cause real hurt, which is not erased by lightly dismissing them as casual remarks or jokes," said Mr Wong at a forum live-streamed from the University Cultural Centre Theatre at the National University of Singapore in Kent Ridge.

He noted that society's attitudes and conditions continue to evolve and change over time, and there are Singaporeans who feel it is time to take a different approach on

race relations - namely that the Government should work on the basis that Singapore is a race-blind society, and remove all rules and practices that underline race in various ways.

These are aspirations that he shares, said Mr Wong. "Perhaps I am young enough to feel the idealistic instincts of the millennials, and old enough to understand the caution born of experience of my parents' generation."

Besides the majority community taking the extra step to consider the needs of minorities, he called on Singaporeans to continue with the approach of mutual accommodation, trust and compromise.

'Treat others in the way you would like to be treated'

Mr Wong said he believes the majority community in Singapore recognises the difficulties that minorities may face.

"I ask that we do more and take the extra step to make our minority friends, neighbours, 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 that it is important to recognise that 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 to rectify," Mr Wong 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, explaining that many of them will naturally object to being characterised in such a manner.

'Don't construe every compromise as an injustice'

Singaporeans must continue to speak up and even be prepared to have uncomfortable discussions about race, Mr Wong added. This is not to start arguments, but to begin civilised discussions, listen to one another, and understand all points of view.

"We should be upfront and honest about the racialised experiences various groups feel, and deal squarely with them," he said.

"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.

The minister made clear that he was not saying Singaporeans should refrain from voicing their unhappiness, or that minority Singaporeans should stop talking about the prejudices they experience.

But when 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 said.

He pointed to trends in 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," said Mr Wong.

"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."

He called on groups advocating change to be conscious about how they approach the matter, and do so in ways that expand the space for agreement, and not narrow it.

In doing so, they should also deepen cross-cultural understanding and not cause defensiveness and suspicion, and appeal to the "better angels" in all instead of instigating a "them versus us" dynamic, he said.

Updating racial policies

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

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

Mr Wong cited the ongoing review on whether Muslim nurses should be allowed to wear the tudung with their uniform. This process entails detailed study and extensive dialogue between the Government and various communities, he said.

"It cannot be rushed, nor should things be changed simply based on who shouts the loudest," said Mr Wong, adding that any policy change must ultimately expand Singapore's common space and strengthen racial harmony, while allowing each community as much room as possible to go about its way of life.

On immigration, he noted that a transient population of work pass holders has been gathered around the Singapore core, which enables the country to stay competitive, attract investments and create good jobs for Singaporeans.

"We control the inflow of these migrant workers. However, it is not possible for us to ensure that their ethnic mix matches our resident population, nor that they meld seamlessly into our social fabric. So from time to time, this creates frictions and issues within and among our communities."

Mr Wong said the Government understands these concerns, and thus continues to review and update work pass policies too, to ensure they meet Singapore's economic needs and also fit into the social context.

Like Singapore's forefathers of all races, this Government is convinced that it must continue to strengthen a "Singaporean Singapore" and build an ever more perfect multiracial society, he added.

"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."

He urged Singaporeans to move forward with a spirit of mutual respect and fellowship by helping one another understand their different cultures, and finding the common stake they have in one another.

"We must have the humility to acknowledge our multiracialism is still a work in progress, the honesty to recognise that not everyone will want to move at the same pace, and yet persevere to protect our multiracialism - cherish it, nurture it, strengthen it."