

Lawrence Wong said majority of Singaporeans “want to work longer”, while netizens rebut him saying many of them can’t afford to retire

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SINGAPORE — Lawrence Wong, Singapore’s Deputy Prime Minister, has claimed that the majority of people in Singapore “want to work longer” as long as they are healthy.

“Because a lot of people recognise that the minute they stop working, that’s when their health deteriorates very quickly,” he said.

Lawrence Wong added that work is more than a source of income and provides dignity and purpose, “there is something fundamental and important about work.”

Lawrence Wong made his remarks in the closing dialogue of Singapore Perspectives 2023 organised by Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) on Monday (16 Jan), according to CNA.

During the Q&A session, Prof Dr Paul Ananth Tambyah, who is currently a Senior Consultant in the Division of Infectious Diseases of NUH, questioned Lawrence Wong on whether the government could make the Silver Support Scheme more universal.

This is to avoid a substantial drop in income when they stop working.

“Would anyone actually want to be operated on by a 70-year-old neurosurgeon? Or ride in a bus driven by a 70-year-old bus driver?”

Paul Tambyah said the narrative seems to be that “we need to keep working”, “and if we are unable to do a particular job, we’ve got to retrain.”

In reply, Mr Wong claimed that surveys have shown that workers want to work longer as long as they are healthy.

“There’s obviously a limit to how long we can work. But also we must recognise with rising longevity, with people living longer lifespans, when we do our surveys, the majority of people do want to work longer so long as they are healthy.”

He added that it was important to work “consistently”, meaning to hold on to a stable job.

“We want to be able to say if you’re a new entrant, you’re a young adult entering the workforce, work consistently, whatever job you can do, you can be assured of a basic retirement sum.”

Mr Wong said Singaporeans must be prepared to “do their part” to contribute to the country’s revenues as needs for healthcare and social spending are expected to rise.

In addition, Mr Wong, who is also Finance Minister, implied that with an ageing population, with needs for healthcare and social spending expected to rise, Singaporeans must be prepared to do

their part to contribute additional revenues in order for the country to meet the increased expenditure.

When replying to former diplomat Kishore Mahbubani's question, Mr Wong said all Singaporeans will "have to play a key role" in changing mindsets and being prepared to "pay more for services" delivered by our fellow citizens.

"Especially if we are concerned about uplifting the wages of lower-income Singaporeans," he added.

Kishore Mahbubani asked Mr Wong whether he sees a need to "rebalance" contributions made by the Government and society over the next 10 to 20 years, when it comes to addressing key issues.

While acknowledging that government's policies have to be reviewed and updated, Mr Wong added that the leadership think that "there is some scope for Government spending to increase."

He noted that Singapore spends about 18 per cent of its gross domestic product (GDP).

"That's relatively low compared to many other developed countries, but with an ageing population, with needs for healthcare and social spending expected to rise, we think that by 2030, the Government will spend about 20 plus per cent of GDP."

"In other words, you have to find other ways of generating revenues. And Singaporeans must be prepared to do their part to contribute those additional revenues in order for us to meet that increased expenditure and provide the necessary assurances and support for Singaporeans."

Netizens rebut Lawrence Wong, saying many work longer simply because they can't afford to retire

Although DPM Wong claimed that the majority of Singaporeans "want to work longer" based on "surveys", many netizens had commented in the CNA's Facebook comment section, expressing their disagreement and disgust.

One commenter, Megat Ibrahim Muhfuz said people will retire if they can afford to retire, but they "simply can't afford to".

"There are other things in life besides chasing the all-mighty dollar. Family, friends, travelling the world, hobbies etc. You can't enjoy any of these things if you're broke. So you work. Until you die," he added that the system is crafted to keep people working.

Another netizen Ryan Heng also commented that "most ppl need to work" and not because they eagerly "want to work", "Housing loan interest rate also.. if don't work, how to pay?"

Agreeing with Ryan Heng, another netizen also posted a similar comment, noting "have to work" is different from "want to work", as the population in the citystate "got no choice but to work".

While DPM Wong said most people would want to work longer “to stay healthy”, Cecilia Wong regards Mr Wong’s comment as “a sweeping statement” since it depends on how an individual wants to live out their retirement life.

The netizen shared how she sleeps and wakes up without any migraines and enjoys quality sleep for 8- 10 hours daily, she even goes for walks every day for an hour or two, and “cycle once a week when people are working”.

“I feel more active & healthier after I quit (job). And I have more time for my old parents and my friends.”

Statistics reveal senior citizens have to work longer

Back in August 2019, a survey by the Centre for Seniors (CFS) found that around a quarter out of 400 surveyed expressed a wish to continue working in their current jobs, while another survey found that more than half of those surveyed said they would like to continue being in full-time employment.

However, another survey done by the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP) at the National University of Singapore in May 2019 found that elderly Singaporeans aged above 65 years old will require at least S\$1,379 a month for basic expenses such as personal care items.

The expense is higher for couples at a minimum of S\$2,351 per month.

The seemingly minuscule CPF monthly payouts is also the real reason why elderly Singaporeans have to continue working or return to the workforce despite their old age and age-related ailments in order to cope with rising living costs.

Reuters reported in Feb 2019 that the employment rate for people over 65 has jumped over 15 per cent in the past decade, making it a third of Singaporeans in the age demographic.

An example of such is 71-year-old cleaner Mary, who told Reuters that “the government’s retirement saving scheme doesn’t provide her with enough money”.

“I have to keep on working until the end of my life,” Mdm Mary lamented. “What to do, no choice. I have to struggle for it.”