

Prof Koh tells 4G leaders: We don't want more S'poreans to become Grab drivers and angry voters

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At the Singapore Bicentennial Conference yesterday (1 Oct), the former Singapore's UN Permanent Representative Professor Tommy Koh cautioned the 4th generation PAP leaders that two of their priorities should be to maintain racial and religious harmony and make Singapore a more equal society.

These include looking into allegations of discriminatory hiring practices and working to make Singapore a classless society, he told the audience. He said, "Today, Singapore is not a classless society. We are divided by wealth, by income, by profession, by place of residence, and even by the school we attend."

He hopes the 4G leaders will help establish a more caring and inclusive society in Singapore, with employers and the Government stepping in to help those who will be laid off as the economy restructures.

"We should not abandon the displaced workers because we don't want more and more Singaporeans to become Grab drivers or, worse, to join the ranks of the angry voters," he said.

"Remember this: It was the angry voters who helped to elect President (Donald) Trump in the United States. It was the angry voters in the United Kingdom who voted to leave the European Union."

Discriminatory hiring practices – Hiring own kind

Indeed, as far back as 2013, incidences of discriminatory hiring practice came to the attention of then Manpower Minister Tan Chuan Jin.

At the time, Minister Tan informed the Parliament that he had heard anecdotes of how in some cases, heads of business units or HR managers have a preference for candidates they are familiar with or of the same nationality, for reasons that are irrelevant to job performance and irrespective of whether they are more competent than other candidates.

"We have also heard of situations where Singaporeans were retrenched or made to resign in the name of down-sizing, only to realise later that their positions were given to foreigners, who were coincidentally from the same countries as the business heads," Minister Tan added.

"Let me be quite blunt. Would these practices not sound discriminatory? Would any respectable progressive company endorse these practices? If this hiring is indeed because they care only about choosing familiar candidates and not about hiring the 'best man for the job', then such practices have no place in Singapore's workplaces."

"I know that Singaporeans perceive some outcomes to be against the principles of meritocracy and fairness, and I fully understand why we feel angry in the process," he shared.

The Fair Consideration Framework (FCF) was later pushed out by the Manpower Ministry under Minister Tan so as to send a “strong signal to all employers that they should consider Singaporeans fairly in filling available jobs”.

However, not long after, he was moved out of Manpower Ministry to the Social and Family Development Ministry in 2015 and in 2017, he was moved out of the Cabinet altogether to become the Speaker of Parliament.

Angry Grab drivers

And speaking of “angry voters”, indeed, many Grab and taxi drivers are already feeling frustrated with the ruling government.

One good example is James Lim who regularly blogs about his cab driving experience. He became jobless in his fifties. With a family to support and unable to find a suitable job, he was forced to become a cab driver. He wrote that he blogs so as to make his dull job “a bit more interesting”.

In one of his write-ups, Mr Lim got so frustrated with the policies of the government that he advised young Singaporeans to emigrate if they could.

He said, “With unabated hordes of foreigners still coming in to depress their (Singaporeans’) wages or even displace them at the workplace, reduce them to second-class citizens and a minority in their own country, how much loyalty and love can we expect from local-bred Singaporean for this country down the road?”

“If you’re a young and educated Singaporean family with valuable skill, I would encourage you to migrate to another country,” he added.

Perhaps Prof Koh might want to consider inviting cabby James Lim to his talks in future so as to better convey his points to the 4G leaders.