

Prof Tommy Koh: What Singapore needs is not sycophants but loving critics and critical lovers

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Professor Tommy Koh echoed a common adage that Singapore is a first world country with third world citizens, noting that Singaporeans lack the civic-mindedness of citizens from an advanced country.

In a dialogue session with Bloomberg News editor-in-chief John Micklethwait at the Singapore Bicentennial Conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies, Prof Koh said, "I am more critical of Singaporeans than of the Government. Many of our people don't give a damn for the environment when they should. Many of our people are selfish and unkind. Just look at the way they drive."

Moderating the session was Straits Times editor and editor-in-chief of Singapore Press Holdings English/Malay/Tamil Group Warren Fernandez.

During the session, Prof Koh spoke on several topics from the issues of class in Singapore society to his hopes for the new generation of political leaders in Singapore.

On economy and class

One of the things Prof Koh called for is the implementation of a poverty line in Singapore and for the wages of workers to be raised, noting the wide pay gap between top executives of a company and its employees.

When asked whether there is an alternative to capitalism, the 82-year old said it would be more prudent to consider what kind of capital works for Singapore. He then talked about moral capitalism, explaining how in this model, companies hold themselves accountable not only to shareholders but to society at large. Companies in a moral capitalism will care for the environment and take good care of their workers while championing diversity and equality, said Prof Koh.

During the session, Prof Koh also expounded on the 4th Generation (4G) leadership we've heard so much about in recent months. Specifically, he asserted that the priorities of this new leadership should be to maintain racial and religious harmony in Singapore and increase equality in local society with the aim of making it a classless one.

"Today, Singapore is not a classless society," said Prof Koh. "We are divided by wealth, by income, by profession, by place of residence, and even by the school we attend."

He also expressed hope that the new leadership will create a more inclusive society and grow the economy sustainable "in harmony with nature".

As for dealing with the inevitable loss of jobs as the economy is restructured, Prof Koh hopes that the government will step in to help those who have been laid off.

“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.

He warned that angry voters lead to undesirable futures.

“Remember this: It was the angry voters who helped to elect President Trump in the United States. It was the angry voters in the United Kingdom who voted to leave the European Union.”

Commenting on Singapore’s relationships with its close neighbours, Prof Koh emphasised the importance of improving relations with Asean countries. He explained that Singapore needs to invest and trade more with Asean countries and reorient its educational programs like school trips and internships towards Asean countries.

“What we need is a whole-of-country reorientation to Asean,” said the Professor.

Loving critics and critical lovers

Prof Koh also touched on the country’s aversion to criticism. Specifically, he voiced his hopes that the 4G leaders will welcome criticism from critics who love Singapore.

“Guided by this virtue, the Government should not have banned Tan Pin Pin’s film *To Singapore, With Love*. It should not have withdrawn the book grants from Sonny Liew and Jeremy Tiang,” he said.

He explained that the contestation of ideas is a necessary part of democracy, adding that the administration should not blacklist critics simply for criticising the government or holding dissenting views.

Prof Koh warned, “Singapore will languish if our lovers are uncritical and our critics are unloving. What Singapore needs is not sycophants but loving critics and critical lovers.”

He went on to say that Singapore has become more cautious and conservative over the years, but asserted that the new leadership should have courage and not be intimidated by foes within and outside the country.

He added: “At the same time, a fourth-generation leader must be an independent thinker who is willing to go where no one else has gone before. To survive and prosper, Singapore should be a leader in innovation, not a camp follower.”

Overall, though, Prof Koh expressed his confidence in the 4G leadership, noting that they are inheriting a country that is already a great success, but that even good things can still be improved.

Prof Koh said he has an eight-point agenda drawn up for the country’s new generation of leaders to consider, which he will be submitting to the fourth prime minister.

“I love Singapore. I would die for Singapore. But are we a perfect people? We are not,” said Prof Koh.

“But I believe that we can always be better and in the remaining years of my life, I want to dedicate my time, energy to making Singapore an even better place, and Singaporeans an even better people,” he added.