

Call out racist behaviours but do so without assuming the worst in people: Lawrence Wong

Ng Jun Sen

TODAY, 25th June 2021

SINGAPORE — Calling out racism and taking a strong stance against such behaviours are important, but when doing so, Singaporeans should also not rush to assume the worst in people, Finance Minister Lawrence Wong said on Friday (June 25).

“If a behaviour is discriminatory and hurtful, we must take a very firm stance, no doubt about that. But there may well be behaviours which are accidental and ambiguous,” said Mr Wong.

The minister was speaking at a panel discussion on race and racism organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), where he was asked by panel moderator Shashi Jayakumar whether calling out racist behaviour openly could be a “double-edged sword”, since doing so could create offence.

Dr Shashi is the head of RSIS’ Centre of Excellence for National Security.

Reiterating a point he made in his keynote speech that people should not adopt the worst interpretation on every perceived slight or insensitivity. Mr Wong said taking this position when calling out racist behaviours will lead to misunderstanding and ultimately make things worse.

“In the end, it comes down to the attitudes and mindsets, how do we go about dealing with these sorts of issues. In any multiracial society, there will be imperfections, there will be hiccups, there will be lapses,” he said.

“You have to find ways to address it and also in a spirit of goodwill.”

He then cited TODAY’s Big Read feature published on June 19, which had delved into the topic of race and racism through interviews with scholars, community volunteers and activists, as well as older Singaporeans who have lived through a period of racial tumult.

TODAY had interviewed former national sprinter Canagasabai Kunalan, 79, who said: “To live harmoniously like in the kampung... there must be understanding and there must be forgiveness.”

Mr Wong said on Friday: "That's the key. We need to approach these sorts of issues with understanding, with respect, not with an attitude of wanting to divide and wanting to confront, but address it we must, and seek to forgive one another if we do make mistakes."

Pressing further, Dr Shashi said he has observed how there are those who do not ordinarily speak up about topics on race, but are now uncomfortable with the idea of calling it out in an activist fashion.

"I'm oversimplifying their point of view, but their argument is that we've done quite well as a multiracial, harmonious society up to this point since independence, and some things, sensitive issues, should well be left alone," said Dr Shashi.

Responding, Mr Wong said he respected the views of these Singaporeans who have gone through more difficult times and understand that race is a sensitive matter.

"They can be inflamed and things can easily spiral into negativity, racial tensions, or worse, violence, so I think we should respect these views and heed their caution," he said.

At the same time, if people ask for forgiveness for their behaviour, there must be a way forward to expand the common space and strengthen racial harmony based on mutual understanding and trust, said Mr Wong.

Having such shared objectives in these race discourses will allow everyone to move forward, he added.

POLICIES BASED ON RACE

Dr Shashi had also asked about the future of race-based policies and the relevance of the Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others (CMIO) framework, which was the top voted question among the attendees at the forum.

Mr Wong said many people assume that policies that take into account race will detract from multiracialism.

He said: "I appreciate that view. All I would say is, consider this, if we were to discard CMIO, does it mean that people will start forgetting about their ethnic identities or pay less attention to them?"

"If we were to ignore racial differences, does that mean that the differences do not exist? It's not so clear to me."

On the other hand, policies that take into account race, such as the Ethnic Integration Policy, helped to strengthen racial harmony and, in fact, helped to make people less race-conscious.

Later, Mr Wong acknowledged that the Housing and Development Board policy, which prevents racial enclaves from forming in HDB estates, has caused some minority owners to face difficulty selling their flats.

But he explained that the policy has over the years brought about a sense of belonging and Singaporean identity, eschewing the racial segregation seen in other countries.

Nevertheless, policies can change, so the Government has to look at them carefully to understand why they exist and whether they are still achieving their stated objectives, or if there are any downsides, said Mr Wong, who was the National Development Minister until last year.

“Let's work to improve it, fine-tune it, make it better. Let's not discard it altogether and throw out the baby with the bathwater.”

MINORITY PRIME MINISTER

The moderator then probed Mr Wong for his thoughts on whether there can be a Singapore prime minister who is a minority. He was referring to the hotly debated topic that surfaced in 2019 when Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat said that older generations of Singaporeans were not ready for a non-Chinese PM.

Mr Wong said in response that anyone in Singapore who wants to be prime minister will have to be able to connect with voters, mobilise Singaporeans and lead the party to win elections.

But IPS surveys have shown that a significant proportion of Singaporeans are more comfortable with a PM of their own race, which is true for the different ethnic groups here.

“This is what the survey indicates. I wish it was not so, but the survey results are as they are. So a minority who wants to be PM should be aware of these attitudes — it doesn't mean that he, or for that matter, she, can't be a prime minister. These are the realities on the ground.”

While these are the realities shown by the surveys, it does not mean that Singapore should accept such attitudes, he added. Instead, Singapore should work very hard to change them.

“I certainly will look forward to the day when Singapore has a minority prime minister. I would welcome that,” said Mr Wong.

Some 1,600 people tuned in for the online panel discussion.