

Dialogue with youth: PM Wong on finding balance in Singapore's workforce, making mistakes in life and doing meaningful work

Renald Loh

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SINGAPORE — In what was his first youth engagement since being sworn in as prime minister, Mr Lawrence Wong got a glimpse into what was top of mind for students from various tertiary institutions here.

Queueing up behind the microphones for their turn, they asked him questions that ranged from career advice to social mobility, and even if it was permissible for Members of Parliament (MPs) to hold second jobs.

About 900 students were in attendance for the dialogue session held at the Singapore Management University (SMU) on Tuesday (July 2) evening.

The session was jointly organised by SMU, the Institute of Policy Studies and Varsity Voices, a student-led inter-university political awareness group. It was held under Chatham House rules to increase the openness of discussion.

Under Chatham House rules, participants may disclose information that comes up during a discussion, but not the identity of the person giving the information.

TODAY picked out five pertinent questions that the students asked and Mr Wong's responses to them. They have been edited for clarity.

ON THE WORKFORCE AND POLITICS

Q: Public discourse on foreign manpower has become increasingly polarised. Most people can accept that we need foreigners, but Singaporeans are also worried that more foreigners will lead to fewer opportunities at the workplace and a dilution of the Singapore identity. How can we balance between the benefits and the pitfalls of a larger foreign workforce, and protect Singaporeans' interests?

MR WONG: When companies invest here, they will want to recruit from all over the world in order to service their Singapore operations.

When companies set up (their) operations here, it is not (just) for the Singapore market — they are setting up regional or even global operations here. So when they do that, obviously, they will want to have access to regional and global talent.

We have to stay open, because this is the only way to attract investments and create jobs for Singaporeans.

How do we find the balance? We do it by controlling the inflow of foreigners — with a system of levies, quotas, all sorts of safeguards.

Soon we will also be putting in place a new legislation on workplace fairness to prohibit discrimination by race, by nationality or by age.

Hopefully, all that will provide for a fairer and more competitive workplace environment.

At the same time, we are doing even more to invest in Singaporeans.

We are giving you the extra advantage by investing in your skills, by investing in training programmes for you, (and by) investing in opportunities for you to work overseas.

Q: In view of the increasing contestation of our political arena under your premiership, how will your Government strategise and communicate with Singaporeans to implement unpopular but necessary economic policies — despite the increase in support for more opposition voices among younger Singaporeans?

MR WONG: If we have the mandate in the next election, then we will continue with the same approach — which is to reject populism but to do the right things that are in the best interests of Singapore and Singaporeans.

Some of these things will be popular: If I provide another round of CDC vouchers, everyone will be very happy. But there will also be policies that are necessary and not so popular.

Because whatever the Government does, we have to make sure our budget is balanced. We have to make sure that we pay for the measures that we introduce, and we have to make sure that we keep moving Singapore forward in the right path.

And if these are difficult measures, but still important to do, we will explain to Singaporeans why they are necessary, and we will try our best to persuade Singaporeans to understand and to support these policies.

Q: You mentioned in your opening address that there are many alternative career paths now. For example, starting up (businesses). But it seems that some policies, like the HDB Flat Eligibility letter under the Housing and Development Board (HDB), are not updated to support such Singaporeans.

As students, we can request a deferred income assessment. But this option is not open to graduates who are starting up (their businesses) and do not give themselves a salary. What can be done to support young Singaporeans who want to settle down and start families but also pursue their dreams?

(In order to apply for a HDB flat, couples will first have to obtain a HDB Flat Eligibility letter. This letter will inform flat buyers upfront of their eligibility for a HDB housing loan — the amount they are eligible to loan from HDB to buy the flat. HDB assesses this amount based on the average gross monthly income of the couple to ensure that they do not borrow beyond their means.

For couples who have completed their full-time studies 12 months before applying for the letter, they are able to defer this income assessment to a date that is nearer to their key collection appointment for the HDB flat.

The student who posed this question highlighted that fresh graduates who choose to start a business upon graduation will not be eligible for a housing loan if they do not provide proof of income required to service the loan — especially if they do not pay themselves a salary in order to run the business.)

MR WONG: I think we will be prepared to be flexible. It is very hard to do it across the board.

In cases where there is an entrepreneur who may not have a good salary but has a very promising venture, and therefore potentially has the ability to pay the (housing) loan, then I think HDB can be persuaded to be more flexible (with giving out a loan). But it will have to be a case-by-case (analysis).

The last thing HDB wants to do is to provide a loan, and then the entrepreneur finds that the business is not successful, and they end up saddled with a very heavy debt.

But your point is well taken because we do want many more young people like yourselves to settle down (and get married) quickly.

LIFE LESSONS

Q: You spoke about many developments that affect our lives today, such as artificial intelligence and the Covid-19 pandemic. In view of these developments, if you could go back in time to 2011 and give Lawrence Wong, the newly elected (MP of West Coast Group Representation Constituency), a piece of advice, what would it be?

MR WONG: The only thing I would say is expect the unexpected. Just keep on learning, keep on improving, keep on growing. Because (for) all of us in life, there will be ups and downs, there will be mistakes, there will be setbacks.

I look back sometimes at some of the speeches I made in 2011 and I cringe because I think to myself, "Gosh, I was really bad".

But that is the whole point, right? We are allowed to make mistakes, we are allowed to fall down and sometimes we learn more from the setbacks.

We learn a lot more when we are pushed to the limit, when we go beyond our comfort zone. And then we start to realise we can be much, much better.

Q: You mentioned that we should stop comparing ourselves to other people and we should start looking within. But... in the public service, you are constantly being compared against each other, to get your grades, to get a promotion, etc. It also starts from your education as well when you are younger — you have aggregate (scores), you have streaming, you have the best schools, the worst schools.

Will there be more changes in the workplace? What would be your plan to undo this (mindset in the) system?

MR WONG: I do not have an easy answer, to be honest, because the challenge will always be there.

In a competitive economy, companies, organisations will have to look at promoting certain individuals. All organisations operate on the basis of having a command structure.

But I think what we can do in Singapore is to encourage and promote a more egalitarian culture, where we are all equals.

We may have different roles — not everyone can be the chief executive officer (or) the department head or the division head. But everyone should feel respected. There is no need to have to bow and scrape before your superiors.

Go back to focus on your strengths and do your work well. Eventually, there will be possibilities for you to flourish. I say that from personal experience, too.

When I started work in 1997, I joined the civil service. They had different tracks of progression — fast track and normal track. I was not on the fast track. The finance (sector) was paying well and (my peers in that sector) were all earning more than me.

Because of those pressures, I did think of leaving the civil service at one stage. But over time, I met with mentors who encouraged me to focus on my work (and) think about the impact of the work I do in the public service. I eventually continued on in the public service for 15 years before entering politics.

I found that meaningful and fulfilling and I found it to be a calling. I did not feel the need after that to compare with others, because once you centre and focus on what you think is meaningful and fulfilling, I think the comparisons become less important.

The pressures will exist, I acknowledge that. It is impossible to remove it entirely.

But try to find meaning and purpose in what you do. You will feel less pressure in society at large, and we can all flourish and thrive in our own ways.

That is the Singapore I hope we can all achieve together.