

Leaders should note what the young are saying on social media to foster culture of diversity: Chan Heng Chee

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- Young people are turning to Instagram to discuss serious social issues such as anti-racism, racial justice and social justice, Professor Chan Heng Chee said
- This may explain the "explosion" of heated views and reaction to Chinese privilege, she noted
- Leaders should listen so that they may take in the concerns and address points of misconception
- Prof Chan also said that it would be better if the future leadership here is intergenerational

Leaders here should pay greater attention to what younger people are saying, including the views they share on social media platforms so that they may look into any concerns and address misconceptions, Ambassador-at-Large Chan Heng Chee said.

Professor Chan made the point while talking about the future of Singapore's leadership at an online forum on Tuesday (Jan 19) that was part of the Institute of Policy Studies' annual flagship conference, Singapore Perspectives.

She also said that the country's future leaders must be intergenerational to represent the concerns of all segments of society. They should be bold as well and seek to instil a culture of "daring to try", so that Singapore will not slip behind, she added.

On understanding the evolving diversity of society and the need for the leadership circle to reflect this, Prof Chan noted that young people have been turning to Instagram to discuss serious social issues.

"Instagram used to be about lifestyle. You will see 10 picture frames of food, social gatherings and fashion. These days, there are serious discussions about gender inequality, racial inequality and inequality regarding migrant workers.

"Now this may explain the explosion of heated views and reaction to Chinese privilege, which was... trending on social media."

Chinese privilege refers to the advantages that the Chinese have as the majority, similar to that of "white privilege" in the United States.

Prof Chan, who is also chairman of the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities at the Singapore University of Technology and Design, then provided a perspective to the ongoing narratives surrounding Chinese privilege, and highlighted that a segment of the Chinese population here disagree that such a notion exists.

"They remember that at the birth of our nation, the Chinese community was told by (founding prime minister) Lee Kuan Yew that they should set aside their claims for majoritarianism and accept that (the) Chinese (language) would not be the national language, even though they were the overwhelming majority in the population."

She added: “Then in the 1980s, Nanyang University was merged with the University of Singapore. That was how NUS (National University of Singapore) came to be. This episode was painful for the Chinese-educated community.

“They were asked to attend classes in NUS in English, a language they were not equipped to handle at the tertiary level. Many dropped out. They were angry and unhappy with the Government. So perhaps, Chinese privilege is not as appropriate to use in Singapore, given the history.”

As it is, politicians have been good in promoting Our Singapore Conversation, and more recently, initiating the Singapore Together movement with the people to discuss and design policies for community level partnerships, Prof Chan said.

For instance, government leaders learn that climate change is an issue that resonates with the young. “It is also an issue that people at the top here... consider an ... existential one for Singapore,” she said.

AN INTERGENERATIONAL LEADERSHIP

On the need for an intergenerational leadership, Prof Chan said: “When Prime Minister Lee (Hsien Loong) said that he was determined to plan succession and step down at 70, I thought he should not, but PM was aware of the trends out there that our younger population is articulate, with strong opinions, especially those who have received tertiary education...

“They are digitally empowered and have expectations, but leadership should be intergenerational because in Singapore, we face an ageing electorate and an ageing workforce. It is essential to have all segments reflected to ensure a good understanding of the ageing issues.”

Fellow speaker, Professor Margaret Heffernan, a professor of practice at the University of Bath in England, said that Prof Chan’s point on intergenerational participation was “absolutely spot-on”.

She similarly said that she herself was struck that the millennial generation is “much more focused on justice, social justice”, pointing out that this was why a number of organisations she worked with had started setting up shadow boards.

“They recognise that by the time you get to the level of an executive committee or a board of a company, you tend to be of a certain age, you tend to have a certain background, you tend to have a certain income, which changes the way that you see things,” Prof Heffernan said.

“These shadow boards are quite interesting because they are certainly about the best business and management education tool I’ve ever seen. They provide insight and different perspectives, the kind that the board definitely does not have.”

Mr Han Fook Kwang, editor-at-large at The Straits Times and a senior fellow at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, was invited to speak at Tuesday’s forum as a discussant.

He agreed with Prof Chan’s notion of having an intergenerational leadership as well.

Pointing out that the template for leadership renewal in the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) is cohort renewal, with the fourth-generation leaders slated to take over, he asked if it

is still the relevant today where one generation can be “completely different” from other generations and connections need to be fostered.

LGBTQ ISSUES

During the question-and-answer segment, an audience member asked a question about whether the state should lead and intervene in social discussions such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights.

Prof Chan replied that she leans on the side of the Government leading the issue, although the Government had said that it would have the society lead this when it came to the issue of the repeal of Section 377A of the Penal Code, which criminalises gay sex.

"In recent years, (this) has emerged as a significant gender diversity issue because it is about the legitimacy of status and rights of those who identify themselves as LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer)," Prof Chan said.

"It is not an easy issue for Singapore as we are a conservative society with segments of the population who have difficulty accepting this. The question is whether leadership in the next decade should lead society on this issue and point to a progressive outcome or be led by society, waiting for society to change."

On her view that leaders should be bold, Prof Chan mentioned that a foreign architect had once told her that when it came to plans for a very innovative and unusual structure, his Singaporean clients tended to ask if it had been built before and they would like it more if it had been done three to four times before.

This was vastly different from his clients who were from the United Arab Emirates, who would not be interested in plans that had been built before and would want something totally new.

It can be hard to try something new when leaders here have used one playbook over the years and been successful with it, Prof Chan said.

"Now, I understand that we in Singapore do not want to be reckless, but we can be overcautious."

She added: "When a business strategy or model has worked for a long time, why would you change it until you run into real trouble? Some degree of risk-taking is a necessary quality to be innovative and relevant and to be ready for the political landscape of the future."