

Political diversity ultimately decided by Singaporeans, DPM Lawrence Wong tells youth

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- Ultimately, it is Singaporeans who decide at the polls the extent of political diversity that they would like, Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong said
- Mr Wong said at a youth dialogue that the likelihood is real that there will be more political contestation here
- The dialogue was part of a two-day conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies
- Participants discussed and asked questions on issues ranging from Section 377A to pushing unpopular but necessary policies

SINGAPORE — It is Singaporeans who ultimately decide at the polls the extent of political diversity that they would like, as the nation, much like anywhere else in the world, sees more political contestation, Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong said.

Mr Wong was answering a question on political diversity posed by a moderator during a dialogue with youth on Wednesday (Sept 7) organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

“Singaporeans will decide that at every election. It is a free election. I think how much diversity, how much checks and balances you want, it’s really for Singaporeans to decide,” he said.

Mr Wong, who is also Finance Minister, added that the electorate will be presented at each election with what the government of the day has done, and the population will decide on whether the incumbent “will continue to form the government in Singapore, or if they feel that someone else is better and there are other alternatives they prefer”.

“We can only do our best in government and as a political party. What we do know is that Singapore, as with all countries, (with) the trends and the desire for more checks and balances, the likelihood that there will be more political contestation is real,” he said.

The dialogue capped off a two-day conference organised by IPS this week involving about 100 young people comprising students and professionals from the public and private sector.

Entitled “Young Singaporeans Conference 2022: Uncharted”, the event saw participants break into teams to discuss a gamut of issues that included sustainability, inclusivity, mental health and wellness, and the digitalisation of businesses.

Dr Teo Kay Key, research fellow at the Social Lab of IPS who moderated the dialogue, also asked about how the Forward Singapore exercise would incorporate political diversity “when trying to forge a social compact”.

Forward Singapore is a national conversation led by the fourth-generation political leaders.

When he launched the exercise in June, Mr Wong said that the aim was for Singapore to refresh its social compact as the country faces a "crossroads" in its journey.

Mr Wong on Wednesday stressed that the Government is "not doing a political exercise".

"So we're not talking about engaging political parties. We're talking about engaging Singaporeans. And understandably, Singaporeans have diverse views, there will be diverse opinions. And we welcome that," he said.

Mr Wong said that as part of the exercise, the Government is trying to reach out to as many Singaporeans as possible "with an interest in building a better Singapore", regardless of their political beliefs.

Dr Janil Puthuchery, Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information, who was the other member of the dialogue panel, said that while there is diversity across political parties, there is "no lack of diverse views within the People's Action Party".

Members of the ruling party are given the opportunity to air their views in the media and during debates, but "ultimately, you have to do something with the diversity", he added.

"Diversity within a political perspective, it's good provided you can then come together to chart a way forward."

ON SAME-SEX MARRIAGE, WORK-LIFE BALANCE AND PUSHING UNPOPULAR POLICIES

One of the participants asked the panel how the Government deals with difficult debates with various groups and moves forward when putting across unpopular policies, such as raising the Goods and Services Tax.

Mr Wong said that for any given issue, there will be multiple stakeholder groupings involved such as the Government and its agencies, a group advocating for change, another group opposing such a change, and "people who are largely in the middle".

Besides "sense-making" and understanding sentiments from all sides, the Government then needs to decide on the right thing to do based on the different trade-offs, regardless of the popularity of such a move.

"And if the Government — or any group for that matter — feels that that particular move is necessary and will help Singapore and Singaporeans, then notwithstanding the sense-making and the different views, the responsibility is to engage, persuade and try to convince people why this move will eventually be a net plus," he added.

A participant also referred to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's announcement during the National Day Rally last month about the Government's intention to repeal Section 377A of the Penal Code, and whether further steps such as a civil union between same-sex partners would be viable in the near term.

Mr Wong stressed that the repeal was "not a done deal" and has to be first debated in Parliament.

“It’s a real concern for us, that if we can’t even get through this first step without keeping our society together, don’t even talk about next steps,” he added.

“So I think to take this first step, while ensuring that people with very strong views on both sides can understand what we are trying to do, find common ground and accept this new balance in our society, that’s our main focus now.”

Another participant during the dialogue also spoke about the potential trade-off between competitiveness and achieving work-life balance, and asked whether Singaporeans need to aim for competitiveness all the time given “where we are at this stage in society and in the world”.

Mr Wong said that this would be putting a negative connotation on competitiveness, equating it to being stuck in an endless rat race.

Instead, he would rather reframe it and see Singaporeans pursue excellence in any field or profession that they choose.

Mr Wong added that society’s limited view on success, tied to “limited, few chosen preferred jobs”, had led to a stressful environment where everyone pursues certain academic routes or schools to reach certain desired professions.

If society instead widens its view on success, “hopefully, the sense of dignity, pride and respect accorded to people pursuing excellence across all fields will be different from what it is today”.

And while it may be unrealistic to expect this to lead to equal pay across all jobs, Mr Wong said that it may at least close the income gap across different professions.