

Language and law the key legacies of colonialism, Lee Kuan Yew: DPM Heng

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Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance Heng Swee Keat touched on wide-ranging issues – from the legacies of colonialism and founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew to inequality in the city-state – during the Singapore Bicentennial Conference at Fairmont Singapore on Monday (30 September).

Those were in response to questions asked by attendees during a dialogue which concluded the first day of the two-day conference. The dialogue was chaired by ambassador-at-large with the Minister of Foreign Affairs Chan Heng Chee.

The conference, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and supported by the Singapore Bicentennial Office, commemorates Singapore's 200-year history since the arrival of Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819. Over 800 people, including experts, students and members of the media, attended the event.

Legacy of colonialism

The widespread of the English language in Singapore is a “very important aspect” of the legacies of colonialism and the late PM Lee, said Heng.

“Today, there are between 1.5 and 2 billion English speakers in the world. And it's pretty much the language of commerce, diplomacy, and in people-to-people exchanges,” he explained.

The other aspect would be the rule of law, Heng said, “Mr Lee Kuan Yew was a student of law in the UK. And when he came back, he had a very strong conviction that the rule of law is important for Singapore. And that is why we had such focus on enacting the right laws, enacting the right institutions to manage this.”

It also helped to open Singapore up to the rest of the world, he added.

“That's how we became very multi-racial, and of course, also very multi-religious. And the pledge that we take every day – regardless of race, language, and religion – is now a very important part of our legacy and a very important part of our future.”

Lee Kuan Yew's role in nation-building

Heng described the late Lee's role in nation-building as very critical, by setting a foundation across Singapore's economic growth, security, foreign relations, and importantly, in “our own internal social compact” spanning across policies for national service to housing.

His role in shaping Singapore's place in the world was equally critical.

“Mr Lee put it very well when he said, ‘For Singapore to continue to survive and prosper, we need to be relevant and useful to the world.’ And to be relevant and useful to the world is a simple term, but in reality, awfully complex to navigate,” Heng said.

Singapore in a changing world

For Singapore to remain relevant, useful to and not overtaken, the Republic needs to be aware of geopolitical relations, such as trade tensions between the United States and China, and react accordingly, said Heng.

“It is a world that’s changing so rapidly that we have to change and evolve many of our systems, In order to make our contribution to the world,” he explained.

These include finding areas for which we can contribute as well as building relationships with countries around the world.

But the most important thing to address and maintain, he stressed, is how “Singapore and Singaporeans can continue to stay as one people”.

“Because if you look at the fate of many nations, why things broke up eventually is that people don't feel that they are one people. And the sense of unity in our country in our nation is critical.”

Others’ impact on Singapore

When countries elsewhere develop, Singapore cannot stay put, stressed Heng.

“We would like to work with our partners to see how we can all grow together. What it means is that Singapore needs to change and run even faster. And that is why we’re putting such a strong emphasis on our industry transformation and our economic restructuring,” he said.

The fourth industrial revolution, noted Heng, will have “a significant effect on each and every one of us”.

China vs US

The ongoing tensions between the two superpowers is not “just about trade deficit or surpluses”, even though it started out that way, said Heng.

“The issues are getting more complex. And from a trade war, it became a technology war. And from (that), I think it’s a longer-term competition of values and systems – what sort of values matter? What sort of system of governance matter?”

While both countries should resolved the many internal problems they have, such as inequality in certain cities or states, both parties can play a major role in dealing with global issues, noted Heng.

“Both should play a leadership role in keeping the multilateral system going in addressing global issues, and working with the global institutions, whether it’s the UN, IMF, World Bank, to manage many of these major changes that are happening around the world,” he said.

Singapore, on the other hand, can help to connect like-minded countries, he added.

“We like to stay neutral, independent. And we like to be friends with everyone in the world. So I think let’s find opportunities for us to bring together many more like-minded countries.”

Multi-racialism in Singapore

Race, language, and religions are issues for which Singapore must continuously be vigilant and cannot be taken for granted, said Heng.

Laws, such as the maintenance of religious harmony act and the presidential council of minority rights, provide an institutional underpinning for many things Singapore do, including policies such as ethnic integration in HDB flats, he said.

“I think it is a very different world when people of different races religions are mingling with one another all the time,” said Heng. “It’s something which is always a work in progress, but we must try.”

Malaysia relations

Heng noted the “desire to have better relations to resolve issues in a proper manner” between both countries, during bilateral meetings with Malaysian PM Mahathir Mohamad.

Singapore has had discussions on the water issue with the Malaysian government and Heng hoped for good progress on the issue.

“But at the same time, we ourselves have also diversified our water supply...harvesting our rainwater to NEWater and desalinated water is progressing well. So I think we are in a very fundamentally different state today that we were, say 20 to 25 years ago. And I believe that the technology will keep improving,” he said.

Tackling inequality

The issue of inequality is the “work of many, and not just Singaporeans, but all people” living in Singapore, said Heng.

“I hope that our leaders in our universities and in various places, can do a better job of integrating our students,” he added.

“Because by harnessing the strengths of people, judging people on the merits, and on what they can contribute, rather than the basis of their race language of religion, we can build a better society together and indeed a better world.”