

Govt will go deeper into public issues: Lawrence Wong

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Singapore's government plans to further ramp up efforts to engage with its citizens following the ruling party's by-election defeat Saturday that reflected the level of unhappiness over government policies.

Acting Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Lawrence Wong said the next phase to the Singapore Conversation, an initiative to improve dialogue with the people, "will allow us to go deeper into public issues" after the first round of consultations brought out what people felt were defining issues.

Addressing about 1,000 people from schools, government and civil society at a forum by the Institute of Policy Studies on Monday, Wong said the government and civil service is "working to develop its capabilities" in putting its ears closer to the ground in order to allow for more diverse views to be aired and considered in policymaking.

Political observers have said the government needs to reconnect with the people after the People's Action Party's candidate in the Punggol East by-election lost to the Workers' Party's candidate by a surprising margin.

Many Singaporeans have complained about the influx of immigrants over the past several years and have blamed that for the rising cost of living, stagnation of wages and crowding in public transport.

Wong said the government is aware of what the key issues are for the public and that it has started thinking about reformative measures.

Wong also acknowledged the need for increased transparency in the government's decision-making process, so that people will feel like they are involved and their views have been considered.

"The political environment is changing, process of governance must change, and the government approach must change," he said.

Meritocracy

On how governance principles should evolve to address challenges, the acting minister believes that ability and performance are a fair and objective basis for making decisions.

He acknowledged that there were concerns that with growing income inequalities a system of meritocracy would favour those with means.

"Clearly, unfettered meritocracy taken to an extreme can lead to inequality and a winner-takes-all society, but that does not mean that meritocracy is inherently bad or dysfunctional," he said.

In line with this, he said that policy-wise the government has initiated changes to increase state investment in pre-school education.

He also said it would continue to study and review how policies need to be updated to give full opportunities to every child.