

Keeping young people rooted in Singapore

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Young Singaporeans are intelligent and motivated. They want to exchange opinions and seek higher ideals. But some may also feel restless or disenfranchised.

And the government, schools and parents have a part to play to ensure these young people - who make up 26 per cent of the total electors in this year's General Election - remain rooted in Singapore, said a panel of speakers to about 250 people on Tuesday.



Six young politicians share their views on engaging young Singaporeans today. (Yahoo! photo)

The panel, who were from six political parties, were speaking in their personal capacities at an Institute of Policy Studies forum titled "What Youth Want".

The forum explored the political attitudes of people aged 36 and below, issues that matter to them and how they can be engaged.

Pointing to a "restlessness" among young people, the Workers' Party's (WP) Member of Parliament for Hougang Yaw Shin Leong said, "I believe they are searching for their place in society, where their aspirations can be fulfilled."

This could be a reason why there were huge turnouts at political rallies, such as the WP's during the GE, said the 35-year-old, who felt campus activism was one way to involve the youth.



NSP's Nicole Seah calls for more social enterprises to promote a social agenda in Singapore. (Yahoo! Photo)

Bread and butter issues remain important to young Singaporeans but "more of us are increasingly conscious of higher ideals, environmental issues, human rights, animal rights, artistic expression and so on," said the People's Action Party's Desmond Lee, 34.

He noted, they hold "no automatic affiliation" to any political party and are discerning in their choices even as they support having more voices in Parliament and external checks on the government.

To connect with this group, policies not only need to be rational and sound but must

be implemented "fairly, justly and compassionately", he added. The government also needs to change the way it consults with people and start gathering feedback on policies earlier on, he noted.

Singapore Democratic Party's Michelle Lee, 35, pointed to Generation Y's "awakening" at a time of terrorist attacks, natural disasters and two major "bear markets".

Such events give them a "very different world view" and result in a scepticism of institutions and the establishment, she said. As such, they seek "higher order needs" like social networks, immediate relationships and a sense of belonging.

Today, Generation X-ers, who were born in "stability and wealth" are also starting to feel that "money is not everything", she added.

Singapore society is at a critical juncture, said Lee. With honest soul-searching, Singapore could see a "renaissance" and establish its place as a cultural and social capital of Asia, she said.

There is also a group of "disenfranchised" youth, who, perhaps looking at their parents' challenges in life, find their future hopeless and bleak, raised Singapore People's Party's Jimmy Lee, 35.

It is this group that political parties, schools and parents need to reach out to, to give them hope and inspire them to work toward their dreams, he said.

He disagreed with a Facebook posting that said youth today are

demanding and have unrealistic expectations. Instead of putting them down, they need to be guided and encouraged to find the path toward their aspirations, he said.

The speakers targeted education as one key way to help young Singaporeans.

Desmond Lee and Jimmy Lee commended the current education system for moving in the right direction, but the latter also urged for more active steps to get youth talking offline about issues like politics.

35-year-old Jeffrey Lim from the Singapore Democratic Alliance and Nicole Seah from the National Solidarity Party, 24, wanted to see more emphasis on critical thinking.

Added Seah, one of the youngest candidates in this year's GE, young Singaporeans are craving a sense of "rootedness" to the country that they grew up in.

"As we have developed fully as an economy, what we are looking ahead to is the next step, not so much as to pull back on economic growth, but really, to look at what more can we do to ensure we have a heart for every single area of society and to



SPP's Jimmy Lee talks about the independent, motivated polytechnic students he has worked work. (Yahoo! Photo)

ensure that nobody gets left behind," she said.

"This is the kind of security that young Singaporeans are looking out for and this is something that will continue to keep them loyal, keep them rooted (to Singapore)."