

Ambassador-at-large Chan Heng Chee warns of potential conflicts between young & old S'poreans

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The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) is trying its best to get Singaporeans to think about ageing.

Even at its largest-scale conference *Singapore Perspectives*, the platform for ministers to take centre stage and tackle tough political questions, all its sessions centre on this issue not many seem particularly interested in.

Its considerably-broad theme “Together” expands on questions such as ‘Will Global City Singapore be “no country for old men,” or will it be a city-state for all ages?’ and ‘How do we sustain economic competitiveness and dynamism give an ageing workforce?’

One of the conference’s almost annual fixtures, Ambassador-at-large Chan Heng Chee, took this on in an interesting fashion, though — by highlighting potential conflicts that may arise between younger and older Singaporeans as the country’s population ages rapidly.

Here are some of the points she made:

1) Rising taxes on workers to support old in rising healthcare — is there a breaking point?

The total expenditure of healthcare costs as percentage of our GDP has gone up over the years, and eventually, increasing taxes will become a way to mitigate this, Chan notes.

Where would the limit for these increments be, though? And would the younger paying more for the old give rise to an increase in expectation on the part of younger Singaporeans to get to enjoy similar benefits in future?

“Will Singapore’s tolerance for tax increases remain? Healthcare costs are indeed rising rapidly... I believe that if taxes continue to increase, there will be unhappiness and what the IPS survey shows (is that) although there is a large group of neutrals at this point, will this result in younger Singaporeans demanding a reduction in older citizens’ benefits? I’m sure there is a tipping point but we are not there yet, judging by the political debate.”

2) The inevitable fight for positions at the top

Chan argues that as more of the aged remain employed, they present an area of potential conflict for younger folk who are working and waiting to move up to the senior roles their elder colleagues occupy:

“There could be conflicts and tensions over jobs and power positions... The next generation will be impatient waiting to take over positions at the top or near top. How does society deal with these pressures? I believe there will be tensions.”

These high-ranking positions are often the best-paying ones, and many seniors, in wanting to keep their jobs, may conversely not be prepared to work for a lower pay:

“In terms of job prospects, the ageing are arguing that they should keep their jobs. The younger people are saying ‘we want your jobs’... Do you want to keep the job at the same high pay, or are you prepared for solidarity to create that kind of harmony to show that you are not going to take that high pay, so some of that pay can create new jobs? “

3) Disagreement in how Singapore’s money should be spent

Chan adds that we may also end up having a conflict in how the national budget is being allocated.

“There is a matter of public policy choices of what proportion of the budget should be allocated to the expenditure for the young and that for the older citizens before there is a contestation. I don’t think we have that argument, but today we have simple conflicts of interests between the bicyclists and PMD (personal mobility device) users (usually younger people)... and walkways for the senior citizens in the housing estates.”

4) Conflicts over jobs due to technology

Older persons should have the opportunity to continue working and contributing to the labour force if they are able and willing to, argues Chan. Yet, tension is created when technological developments take away their jobs.

Where will seniors fit in this picture of developing technology, she asks:

“Older persons do not do well in finding the appropriate kind of work... Only those aged 65 and above form 25.8 per cent of the workforce.

Regarding the percentage of elderly in various occupations... the senior citizens are better educated. They may want to hold onto their last jobs or aspire to a better job...

But at the same time we have to be aware there will be increased automation that will do away with many jobs. The problem for us, in Singapore and in most societies, is to find the sweet spot — The jobs for seniors that have to be created now that some jobs are taken away. Where do they fit?”

An exchange between young and not-so-young

Perhaps the potential future tension between younger and older generations of Singaporeans regarding jobs, technology and indeed, other aspects of life, is best captured in an exchange that took place between a teenage student and Chan, who is now 75.

We transcribed it for your convenience:

Student: In your opinion, to what extent should we make allowances for seniors in the workplace? If these resources are needed in order for seniors to do their job, does that not indicate that the senior in question is incapable of doing their job? ... Would this not be an inequality against the younger people who are searching for jobs as well?

Chan: I'm not saying that they are not able to work — if they are not able to work, enabling technology will not help them. Some technologies take away the need to have strength. It may take away some of the qualities that may not be there when you are ageing. You press a button, things will happen. You work things on a computer, it will happen. That's what I refer to as enabling technology.

Your concern is: Does it take away from the allocation for young people? I think the government is very mindful. I think the concern amongst the ageing is that so much money is spent on young — It's a young world.

The question of 'Why not just hire the younger person instead?' remains, though.

And if you think about it that way, there may also be a disconnect in communication between generations of Singaporeans — another potential area of future conflict. :/

The face of the future

Given these tensions, what can we expect of our future?

Despite raising these points of potential contention, Chan remains optimistic.

She stresses that perspectives toward ageing are changing as more seniors are now able to continue working until the age of 67, for instance. Singapore's cultural attitudes toward the aged, she adds, have to continue changing in order for greater inclusivity and productivity in our workforce:

"There must be genuine rethinking of the concept of ageing, and viewing of the older people as an asset, rather than a liability... There's nothing wrong in age (in itself), but to think of age more positively so it doesn't mean that at 65, you cannot work anymore... Being ageless is how you look on age but it takes years before we can change that mindset. I think we are trying to be age-friendly."

She also poses an interesting hypothetical scenario involving future governments set against the backdrop of ageing — Given these changing mindsets towards old people and social representation, how would our government look like 30 years from now?

For instance, would we see much older individuals in our sixth-generation leadership?

"If it (the senior vote) is going to be such a big proportion, would your sixth-generation of politicians include someone who's 65, and that we do not look at younger people? It's possible! You can have some reversal in the kinds of politicians you look as suitable, and the ones that will represent society."