Mr Lee: Beware rifts that hinder progress

Social divide makes it harder for leaders to get wide support for policies

BY LI XUEYING
POLITICAL CORRESPONDENT

THE man who led Singapore when it went from Third World to First World status warned yesterday that increased social fragmentation may hinder future progress.

Mr Lee Kuan Yew said that “as Singapore grows more segmented, with more diverse educational levels, you will not have the same homogeneous mass of people to rally behind a single policy”.

It is thus a tougher road ahead for today’s leaders, who have to win wide support for policies that cater to different segments.

Observed Mr Lee: “What’s good for the middle-income will be seen by the lower-income as unfavourable to them. What is good for the higher-income will be resisted by the middle-income.

“It is a different society that we face and therefore the political leaders will have a much more complicated job of getting the society as a whole to accept a programme which is segmented to meet the needs of various strata of society.”

The former prime minister was speaking at a forum at the Nanyang Technological University last night.

The 87-year-old, who wore his trademark mandarin-collared jacket and spoke frankly, was noticeably relaxed as he fielded 12 questions from the audience of 1,700 students, on issues ranging from nuclear power to religious harmony.

He chuckled wryly as he noted that Singapore was a “pretty crowded country”, dispensed unsolicited marriage advice to a 27-year-old PhD student, and jabbed gently at one of his questioners who came unprepared.

But Mr Lee was dead serious as he turned to the matter of Singapore’s continued growth – which he prepared a statement on.

Asked by the moderator, Associate Professor Kwok Kian Woon, what Singapore’s biggest challenge was, he replied:

“To maintain the kind of growth, the kind of uplift of not just the material well-being of the population but also its cultural standards and a civilised way of living.”

Comparing Singapore’s income per capita figures with that of its neighbours, he said Singapore could achieve such growth because since independence in 1965, it had “an undivided society” that was solidly behind a meritocratic system.

“My worry about the future is whether we’ll have the same national solidarity – that same desire to increase educational levels, increase performance and having the best people in the best jobs or holding the most important jobs.”

Mr Lee

“The best people... took over the best jobs,” he noted.

Today, in a year that has seen two elections, Singapore already has a political divide, said Mr Lee. “If that political divide remains a political divide and not a national divide where national issues are concerned, then the impact on our growth will not be very much,” he said.

“But if the political divide leads to a national divide and you have constant bickering as you do have in, say, America between Democrats and Republicans or Britain between Conservatives and Labour, then I think we’ll become just another ordinary country with the same problems.”

“So, my worry about the future is whether we’ll have the same national solidarity – that same desire to increase educational levels, increase performance and having the best people in the best jobs or holding the most important jobs. Once we veer away from that meritocratic system, our performance will drop.”

One cause of worry is the mismatch between the expectations of better-educated Singaporeans and the jobs they can secure. Mr Lee said the approach must be to train people in every field, make sure they acquire expertise and direct their talents where they can be most successful.

“Our biggest challenge is to keep those principles in mind and not say, ‘Well, you know, I’m now a graduate so I deserve more’.

He noted that today, 50 per cent of the cohort are university graduates, compared with just 3 per cent to 5 per cent in
No policy ‘can satisfy all segments’

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"Are they really as good as the former graduates?" he asked.

"The top jobs will still go to the top 5 or 7 per cent — that’s about it. That’s the reality which I think I have to ask you to bear in mind when you ask graduates what they want, and when you seek jobs. Don’t say, ‘I’m a graduate, I deserve X number of dollars because that’s what my predecessors got.’"

He said: "We haven’t become brighter as a population; we’ve become more educated, that’s all.

"And that’s the problem the Government faces. That’s the problem the public faces because they get to understand that — no policy can satisfy all segments.”

Mr Lee expounded further on this theme later, when a student asked whether the Government could do more in social welfare. He said: "Everybody demands a bite of the cherry. And we haven’t got limitless reserves.”

Mr Lee also demolished a hypothesis advanced by accountant undergraduate Flora Ng, 20, that Singaporeans had become more “politically aware” after the elections this year.

He said: "When you say they are politically aware, what do you mean by that? Because to be aware of the political situation in Singapore, you have to be aware of the political divisions between classes, the way the economy is going, what opportunities there are for different groups of people.

"So being 'politically aware after the elections' means you just got excited over the election and voted for one party or the other. That does not mean you are politically aware.

"If they were politically aware, the voters must have been much wiser.”

By Tessa Wong

A PhD’s fine, but what about love and babies?

MS JOAN WONG received some unexpected advice on love and life from former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew last night, when she asked him about social cohesiveness.

The 27-year-old, who is pursuing a doctorate in biological sciences at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), observed that Singapore had accepted a large number of foreign immigrants within a short period of time. She asked what could be done to promote a greater sense of belonging among those here.

"Mr Lee said that given Singapore’s fast-aging population and extremely low fertility rate, it needs to accept a sizeable number of immigrants each year, to ensure society has enough young and economically active members."

He then cited figures from projections done by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) in an exercise due to be made public after this month.

He said: ‘The Institute of Policy Studies has a grim statistic of 60,000 immigrants a year to keep our people young and economically active. We can’t digest that; 20,000 maybe, 25,000 then you’re stretched, but 60,000 is insane.”

Mr Lee called the latter figure "politically infeasible”.

The 60,000 figure was used in one of several projected scenarios. The exercise found that if the fertility rate remains extremely low over the long term without any migrants, the resident population would decline and be extremely aged.

Mr Lee then turned the tables on Ms Wong and started gently quizzing about her personal life, to the surprise and amusement of the audience.

He asked her age and if she was married, to which she said "no”. He asked her when she would finish PhD, and she said "in two years’ time.”

He then asked if she had a boyfriend, and again she said "no”.

He then gave her some advice on why she should try to have children by the age of 35.

"After 35, the chances of having mongoloid children, Down syndrome, in other words, a full person, is very high. So my advice is, please, don’t waste time. It’s more important and more satisfying than your PhD but good luck to you. I hope you get your PhD and your boyfriend.”

Asked later what she thought about Mr Lee questioning her, Ms Wong said: "I was quite shocked.”

She added: "I found the dialogue very interesting. I agree with what he said about women getting married later, how it’s unavoidable that they are postponing having babies.”

Mr Lee on...

"Well, when I introduced bilingualism, China was not on the rise. China was then a poor, underdeveloped country. I got Singapore to go for English as our first language because that connected us to the world, to modern sciences, commerce and made Singapore what it is now. I insisted on the mother tongue as a second language in order that you’ll have self-respect and self-identification. Now that China is on the rise, it’s a bonus point.”

"Eventually the bilingual policy was a strategic move planned a long time ago,”

8 Mr Lee on...

Divide ‘between religions, not religious and non-religious’

THE religious divide in Singapore is not between those who are religious and those who are not, said former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew yesterday.

Rather, he believes “the divide is between competing religions.”

Speaking at a forum at Nanyang Technological University, he gave the response to undergraduate Xue Xianyu.

Mr Xue, 24, had asked Mr Lee about remarks made by Acting Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports Chan Chun Sing last Saturday, that religious and non-religious people must show understanding and tolerance towards each other as both groups grow bigger.

"I beg to differ from Chun Sing,” said Mr Lee.

He asked Mr Xue, who is non-religious, if he would ask someone of their religion before making their acquaintance, and Mr Xue said "no”.

"So, I don’t see the divide. The divide is between competing religions,” said Mr Lee, adding: ‘If you try to convert a Muslim to Christianity, you know that there will be a very big row. It is the religious divide that competes against each other.”

Emphasising that this competition was over getting "converts”, Mr Lee dismissed Mr Xue’s suggestion for a non-religious representative to be in the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO).

Mr Xue had argued that the move would help religious leaders better understand the views of the non-religious group, as religious strife also had a detrimental effect on this group.

"I don’t see how that helps,” said Mr Lee.

"The Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO) (tries to) reconcile the competing claims of various religions on wanting to win converts. If you have no converts join them, how does that help?”

The non-religious do not want to be converted, he said, therefore their presence in the IRO would be beside the point.

Mr Lee, whose anti-communism is well-known, concluded on a sangfroid note: “If you try to convert me, I’ll say thank you very much. I’ve thought about heaven and hell, I’m prepared to face either, if either of them exists.”

Helping some in society ‘comes at cost to others’

FORMER prime minister Lee Kuan Yew yesterday laid out the obstacles that stand in the way of policies to make Singapore more equitable.

Asked by undergraduate Muhammad Faruq Osmam, 23, about what the Government should do to help those in lower-middle- and middle-income groups, Mr Lee said that while he is not the prime minister, he knows that the problem is at the PM’s job.

"He is the one with the divisions in society mean that no policy can benefit everyone, he said. In fact, a policy to help a certain segment is likely to come at a cost to another.

"If you solve the problem at the lower end, you are going to upset the people in the middle. If you solve the problem at the middle, the upper end will be upset.

"Everybody demands a bite of the cherry,” he said. "But we haven’t got limitless reserves.

Using the reserves to satisfy everyone, he argued, would lead to stagnation like in Europe, the UK, and to a lesser extent, the US.

"If social security means you work hard, but you get the same benefits as the other chap who doesn’t work hard, why should I work?" he asked.

He said he had heard of how he had been asked to perform a psychological impact of a blanket welfare program.

The personal motivation and drive to better oneself and one’s family will deteriorate if he is not paid for his work.

He emphasised that the Government should help everyone have the basics of "health, housing, education,

"You have to give everybody the same platform from which their children can excel,” he said. "But beyond that, if I’m in charge of policy I would not go into welfare policies. It’s difficult to do to the performance of our own economy.”

"Pressed by Mr Faruq, who cited a Straits Times report early yesterday, Singapore has a “Third World wage structure,” Mr Lee disagreed. He said with a laugh, saying: "It’s easy for an editor of the Straits Times to write that. But if he or she is to get economic policy and he has to consider the long-term consequences of changing the policy, he will have to think very carefully through it.

He then asked Mr Faruq what he thought should be done for the lower-middle-income groups.

"When income ensured, Mr Lee said patiently: ‘Think over it very carefully, then ask me the question the next time we meet.”

Divide ‘between religions, not religious and non-religious’

By Rachel Chang

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"I hope it is so. It shows that Malaysians are observing the agreements they have signed without trying to retaliate in other directions, such as water, which will lead to war.”

"Whether the return of Taiping Pagar railway station to Singapore was a milestone in diplomatic relations with Malaysia.”

"I think the more connectivity there is between the two countries, the more both will prosper... Where the bridge should be and what the cost will be have to be worked out.”

Dialogue with Mr Lee Kuan Yew at www.razortv.com.sg