

S'pore must 'embrace diversity as its strength'

Ho Kwon Ping sees nation becoming increasingly diverse in next 50 years

By **CHARISSA YONG**

SINGAPORE'S sense of nationhood and unity has never been stronger than in the past weeks when hundreds of thousands of Singaporeans came together to mourn the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew, said businessman Ho Kwon Ping yesterday.

But in the next 50 years, post-LKY, the country will be increasingly diverse in ways that run up against rigid expectations of racial and social attitudes.

Singapore's challenge is to embrace this diversity as its strength and as an integral part of itself, said Mr Ho in his fifth and final lecture as the Institute of Policy

Studies' (IPS) S R Nathan Fellow.

In his 50-minute address, he examined how this openness and acceptance of Singaporeans who may be different from the mainstream can be a defining characteristic of Singapore's identity.

He said Singapore is ethno-culturally more similar to New York City – where culturally distinct neighbourhoods coexist cheek by jowl – than to the homogeneous cities of Tokyo or Shanghai. “New Yorkers, for all their amazing diversity, all love their city. Like

New Yorkers, Singaporeans must also embrace each other as individuals and not as categories.”

For one thing, the traditional racial categories of “Chinese, Malay, Indian and Other” oversimplify Singapore's diversity, he said.

Immigrants or foreign workers from China and India, for example, fall into the Chinese and Indian categories respectively, but hardly identify or interact with Chinese and Indian Singaporeans.

Traditional norms of heterosexuality also do not adequately de-

scribe “people of different LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) affiliations, or alternative family norms such as single or unmarried parents, or same-sex couples”, he said.

Mr Ho suggested abandoning these stereotypes and viewing people as individuals. “Everyone is unique, everyone is quirky, everyone is rude and kind at different times, and everyone has to simply respect and even appreciate the other's difference.”

In an ensuing hour-long question and answer session, Mr Ho was asked how a diverse society should be organised. He said: “You cannot change human nature. People find affinity among their own kind... But we should try more consciously to break down barriers to allow people to have more cross-cultural interaction.”

His lecture, attended by about 560 people including civil servants and students, followed four others on Singapore's politics and governance, economy and business, security and sustainability, and demography and family.

Mr Ho also addressed two other social challenges: mitigating divides between different classes of Singaporeans, and having a more collaborative style of governance.

Education reform can help level the playing field and prevent Singapore from ossifying into a static meritocracy with only children from rich families making it to the top. He suggested re-looking the system of priority Primary 1 admissions based on distance from homes, as many elite schools are in wealthy neighbourhoods.

As for having a less paternalistic, more participatory democracy, the Government can involve more civil society activists and citizens in decision-making, and give them information to debate issues.

Closing the event, IPS director Janadas Devan said the next S R Nathan Fellow is Mr Bilahari Kausikan. The Ambassador-at-large will research public policy and governance issues.

✉ charyong@sph.com.sg

Additional reporting by Nur Asyiqin

Mohamad Salleh

■ SEE OPINION A31