

Drift towards populism 'not inevitable'

Govts must offer hope and real solutions by helping people regenerate careers, and those left behind: Tharman

Charissa Yong

Political upsets like Brexit and Mr Donald Trump's election last year stem from changes within societies that have been going on for decades, Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam said yesterday.

While Singapore has experienced some of these disquieting trends, he believes policies here and in some other societies made a difference in addressing their impact.

He cited four global trends: stagnant wages, declining social mobility, the sense of togetherness in society eroding, and politics and the media becoming more polarised.

"The only surprise is how long it has taken for those underlying domestic changes in society to be reflected in politics," he told 350 people at a global affairs conference, *Has The Game Changed?*, hosted by the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. While last year's populist upsets, driven by anti-globalisation,

have created a despondency about global cooperation, Mr Tharman said: "The real challenge is not about globalisation. The real challenge is in domestic policy responses."

He added: "There are countries where you don't get the same trends played out, although globalisation happens in the same way."

He cited how in Sweden and Singapore, middle-income workers' pay went up by more than that in other advanced economies. But lower- and middle-class workers' wages in America, parts of Europe, Britain and Japan have stagnated.

In America, in 1970, 90 per cent of 30-year-olds had real incomes above what their parents had at 30. Today, the figure is only half, and it affects people's sense of hope.

The second trend he highlighted was a general decline in social mobility across advanced economies.

It is now a stubborn fact and "people know that their chances of moving up in life are less than they used to be if they start off at the bottom".

Third, people no longer think of themselves and society in terms of "we" but in terms of "us versus them". This is complicated by how sectarian strife in one area can go global, widening domestic fissures.

Fourth, politics is increasingly polarised, reinforced by how social media algorithms filter "news" in ways that reinforce people's bias.

Mr Tharman suggested four ways countries can tackle these issues.

One, pay attention to cities that have been left behind, in particular through schools and education.

Two, help people regenerate their careers throughout their lives, through skills training.

"You need redistribution in society, and you may need more in some areas, but it's not at the heart of the matter. It doesn't give hope. Regeneration is what brings hope because you allow individuals, communities and cities to rise through their own abilities," he said.

Three, neighbourhood and urban planning must discourage segregation and encourage people to mix. This will enable communities to do well together, said Mr Tharman.

Four, bring honesty and the need to look to the long term back into politics. He noted a long drift towards "short-termism" reflected in the brazen neglect of issues such as unsustainable pensions and health-care funding. And neither the left nor the right has offered solutions which give confidence for tomorrow's generation, he added.

There is a need for honest politics that "tells it like it is" but offers hope and real solutions, he said.

"There is nothing inevitable about the drift towards populism. We have to regenerate the politics of the centre. It can be done."

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Trump won't have such a free hand globally: Experts

Charissa Yong

US President-elect Donald Trump may become less of a maverick after he begins his presidential term later this month, several leading international affairs experts said at a conference yesterday.

This is because the United States cannot go it alone on global issues, said Mr Enrico Letta, dean of the Paris School of International Affairs, Sciences Po.

"The problems that Trump and other global leaders have to deal with are so high, so huge, so tough, that even Trump has to learn to listen to others," he said.

Mr Letta, who was prime minister of Italy from 2013 to 2014, cited trade, security as well as financial and economic issues as examples of areas where Mr Trump will have to cooperate with other leaders.

Mr Letta also argued that international institutions will oblige Mr Trump to listen to others and to make shared decisions. "The situation will oblige him to change. At the end of the day, the United States is part of the world," he said.

He was on a panel on the new American presidency and its global impact during the last day of a three-day conference hosted by the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy to exchange ideas on global issues. The school is part of the Association of Professional Schools of International Affairs, whose leaders attended the conference.

Meanwhile, Mr James Goldgeier, dean of the American University's School of International Service, said Mr Trump would find it hard to stick to his campaign promises.

For instance, he would not find it so easy to tear up the Iran nuclear agreement, which scales back Teheran's nuclear programme in exchange for sanctions being lifted.

Mr Trump had said he wanted to review the deal, in which Britain, China, Russia, France and Germany were also involved.

But reneging on this agreement will be bad for America's international standing, said Mr Goldgeier.

"For the US to essentially turn its back on the accord in a way that would be so damaging to its standing in the world... would be so misguided that I don't think the Trump administration will do it," he said.

Additionally, the process of doing so would be highly technical and would require a sustained campaign to convince others, argued Foreign Affairs magazine managing editor Jonathan Tepperman.

Agreeing, the University of Michigan's Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy dean Susan Collins pointed to the reality of America having to work together more constructively with other nations. She said: "Things are going to evolve differently from what's been stated so far."

But an America that is less engaged with others means others have to step up and play a bigger role, panellists noted. Mr Letta said 2017 may be the year Europe "be-



(From far left)
Panel
moderator
Jonathan
Tepperman,
Mr Enrico Letta,
Mr James
Goldgeier and
Ms Susan
Collins during
yesterday's
discussion.
ST PHOTO:
MARK CHEONG

comes an adult" and takes the lead on issues affecting global security.

At a separate panel on managing the rise of Asia, Lee Kuan Yew School dean Kishore Mahbubani said Trump or no Trump, one trend is unstoppable: the rise of Asia.

Asian countries too will have to take on their share of responsibilities in the global system, he added.

But former top US diplomat Chris-

topher Hill was less upbeat, saying countries had to brace themselves for an interesting and unpredictable ride with Mr Trump at the helm.

The dean of the University of Denver's Josef Korbel School of International Studies wondered whether Mr Trump knew what he was doing when he questioned the long-standing One China policy.

And attempts to criticise him

may backfire, he said: "He doesn't like being told he's wrong, so when that happens, he doubles down."

Referring to Mr Trump's penchant for taking to Twitter, which had a 140-character limit for posts, to tackle complex geopolitical issues, Mr Hill quipped: "China cannot fit into 140 characters."

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