

Critical to maintain sense of unity among S'poreans: Heng

The many challenges ahead can be tackled if S'poreans have a sense of purpose and community, he says

Linette Lai
Political Correspondent
and Tee Zhuo

In the course of history, many nations fell apart because their people no longer felt they belonged to a collective whole. This makes forging a sense of unity among Singaporeans a critical task, Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat said yesterday.

"The sense of unity in our nation is critical – the feeling that you and I are Singaporeans and we want to make Singapore work," Mr Heng said. "How do we maintain that? That is the critical question."

He was replying to Professor Chan Heng Chee, who pointed out at a dialogue that Singapore's fortunes have waxed and waned over the centuries.

"Do you see a time to come when Singapore would be marginalised again, and that we would lose our position? And what should we do about that?" asked Prof Chan, who is Ambassador-at-Large with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Prof Chan, who is also chairman of the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities at the Singapore University of Technology and Design, was moderating a dialogue with Mr Heng at the two-day Singapore Bicentennial Conference, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies.

The conference, which ends today, aims to examine Singapore's history from before Sir Stamford Raffles arrived in 1819, as well as how the country's past can inform its position in the modern world.

Mr Heng, who is also Finance Minister, stressed the importance of partnership, both among Singaporeans and the wider global community.

"If we lose a sense of togetherness, whether among our people or around the world, we are in for a bad time," he said. "But if we have that sense of purpose, that sense of community, then I think we can tackle the many challenges ahead."

Responding to Prof Chan's ques-



tion, Mr Heng pointed out that climate change and pandemics could also have a significant impact on Singapore's future.

Another critical challenge for the country is how it can remain useful and relevant to the wider world, he added. "If Singapore cannot make a contribution to the world, if we are no longer relevant, then nobody will be interested in our survival or success."

Mr Heng also fielded questions from the audience, who asked him about issues such as inequality, xenophobia, trade tensions between China and the United States, and how Singapore will fare with growing competition from its regional neighbours.

An audience member who identified himself as a student from the Singapore Institute of Technology asked about the role or stance Singapore should have in the ongoing US-China trade war.

Mr Heng said ongoing tensions

between the two countries have gone beyond one on trade deficit and surplus, to a technology war, to a longer-term competition on values and systems of governance.

"What can Singapore do? We can only work together with like-minded countries. I think there are many interesting countries in the world who share our view. We hope that we can be a voice of reason," he said.

CIMB group chief economist Donald Hanna also asked about reconciling the idea of the nation-state and globalisation.

At heart, the Singapore Bicentennial is centred on the principle of a nation-state, which "by definition" is something separate from the rest of the world, he said.

But Mr Heng, he noted, had previously talked about creating a global environment in which small and large states could effectively interact.

Mr Heng replied that there was

no contradiction between being a nation-state and being a member of the global community.

Using an analogy of competing firms, he noted that there are nevertheless areas of common interest where all companies should work together, and yet each company has unique characteristics that add value for their customers.

"In the same way... it would be wrong for us to think that every nation must be like every other nation," he said, adding that diversity of nations is a good thing and each nation's unique culture and heritage should be respected.

He added: "Even as we compete economically and in various fields... push ourselves towards excellence, and be the best that we can be, but at the same time we also cooperate to maintain peace and stability around the world."

linettel@sph.com.sg
teezhuo@sph.com.sg

Ambassador-at-Large Chan Heng Chee, who moderated the dialogue with Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat, showing her delight after Mr Heng corrected her and said she was not an "oldie" when she referred to herself as such. Mr Heng noted that a critical challenge for Singapore is how it can remain useful and relevant to the wider world. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

UNITY IS KEY

The sense of unity in our nation is critical – the feeling that you and I are Singaporeans and we want to make Singapore work. How do we maintain that? That is the critical question.



DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER HENG SWE KEAT, on whether Singapore would be marginalised again.

TACKLING CHALLENGES TOGETHER

If we lose a sense of togetherness, whether among our people or around the world, we are in for a bad time. But if we have that sense of purpose, that sense of community, then I think we can tackle the many challenges ahead.



MR HENG, on the importance of partnership among Singaporeans and the wider global community.

RESPECTING DIVERSITY

It would be wrong for us to think that every nation must be like every other nation.



MR HENG, on diversity of nations being a good thing.

DPM: Electoral boundaries committee independent, not politically motivated

Tee Zhuo

The committee that reviews electoral boundaries is independent and not politically motivated, Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat said yesterday.

To do the electoral boundaries properly, population, demographic and other changes have to be

looked at, and this requires the views of independent experts, said Mr Heng, who is also Finance Minister.

He was answering a question from Professor Paul Tambyah of the National University of Singapore's Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine at the Singapore Bicentennial Conference yesterday evening. Prof Tambyah, who is also chair-

man of the Singapore Democratic Party, had asked Mr Heng if there was a "good reason" that the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee (EBRC) was not completely independent of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO).

"The election boundaries currently are decided by independent civil servants, but ultimately the reporting officer is somebody in the PMO," he said.

In his response, Mr Heng said: "As you yourself pointed out, they are independent."

"So, if you look at what they have done, the constituencies, Potong Pasir remains where it is today, Hougang remains exactly the same

as it is, and Aljunied in the last election remained as it is."

Potong Pasir SMC was a former opposition stronghold under Mr Chiam See Tong, while Hougang SMC and Aljunied GRC are both held by the Workers' Party.

"So, I hope you do not doubt the independence of this commission, that they are doing what is right," said Mr Heng, who is tipped to lead the ruling People's Action Party and be the next prime minister.

He also said that with the changes taking place in new housing estates, he was glad to have civil servants who are independent, could do the work independently, and among other things, "advise us on

what is the best configuration".

Prof Tambyah said: "(They) still report to the Prime Minister."

Mr Heng responded: "Unless you are saying they have been politically motivated... but you yourself said they are independent!"

The exchange occurred during a dialogue with Mr Heng at the Raffles City Convention Centre yesterday evening, moderated by Ambassador-at-Large Chan Heng Chee.

The Elections Department announced the formation of the EBRC on Sept 4. This is the first formal step towards a general election, which must be held by April 2021.

teezhuo@sph.com.sg

Singapore must adapt to great power rivalry to thrive, say experts

Grace Ho
Senior Political Correspondent

History is a "bloody business", and Singapore has to adapt to great power rivalry or suffer the consequences, say experts.

Speaking at a panel session on War and Wealth at the Singapore Bicentennial Conference yesterday, Oxford University professor of global history Peter Frankopan said that maritime powers saw free trade through the lens of self-interest, even in 1819, when Sir Stamford Raffles set up a new British trading outpost in Singapore.

What Raffles wanted was advantage for British traders, he said, while the Dutch interpreted freedom of the seas as something to their benefit.

Singapore leveraged this competitive dynamic to succeed. "Britain's arrival led to the displacement of the Dutch in the region, just as the Dutch had displaced the Portuguese before them."

Today, there are similar tensions between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific region. "The language which has gotten

KEY TO REAPING BENEFITS

The language which has gotten stronger under the Trump administration is that China is seeking to overturn the global order and even displace the US. But if (like Singapore) you are able to adapt and position yourself for a changing world, then you are able to reap the benefits. And if you don't, you suffer the price.



OXFORD UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR OF GLOBAL HISTORY PETER FRANKOPAN

stronger under the Trump administration is that China is seeking to overturn the global order and even displace the US," Prof Frankopan said.

"But if (like Singapore) you are able to adapt and position yourself



Oxford University professor of global history Peter Frankopan (left) and National University of Singapore associate professor of history Peter Borschberg at the Singapore Bicentennial Conference yesterday. ST PHOTOS: DESMOND WEE



for a changing world, then you are able to reap the benefits. And if you don't, you suffer the price."

The two-day conference at the Raffles City Convention Centre is organised by the Institute of Policy Studies to commemorate Singa-

pore's 200-year history since Raffles' arrival. Yesterday's panel session was moderated by Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy dean Danny Quah.

Fellow panellist and associate professor of history at the National

University of Singapore Peter Borschberg agreed that Singapore has always occupied a contested geopolitical space.

For instance, the city state was once a naval base of Melaka, a gatekeeper to towns along the Johor

River, and a rendezvous point for Portuguese and Spanish armadas in the 1500s and 1600s.

And even though Singapore is no longer under a colonial power, there is still competition for control of the Malacca Strait, he added.

"Security before 1819 was multipolar and due to this multipolarity, very fragile. And it may revert to that again one day."

"Singapore was a series of reinventions or reincarnations of a settlement with different functions, and (what that means for its future) is something we need to think about."

To the audience's question on how Singapore should manage US-China tensions, Prof Frankopan said the formation of Asean in 1967 showed how the region could take a neutral approach to great power competition, and "find a way to prosper when the world around you is demanding that you take sides".

"The best thing is to be flexible and understand what is going on in the world, and to work out how to cooperate with people who are in a position similar to you."

graceho@sph.com.sg