

# Diplomat Tommy Koh spells out wish list for 4G leaders

He says racial and religious harmony, a more equal society should be two of their priorities

**Linette Lai**  
Political Correspondent

As Singapore's fourth-generation leaders prepare to step up to the plate, two of their priorities should be to maintain racial and religious harmony and make Singapore a more equal society, Professor Tommy Koh said yesterday.

These include looking into allegations of discriminatory hiring practices and working to make Singapore a classless society, he said.

"Today, Singapore is not a classless society. We are divided by wealth, by income, by profession, by place of residence, and even by the school we attend."

Prof Koh made this call at the Singapore Bicentennial Conference as part of an eight-point agenda he had drawn up for the country's fourth prime minister and his team to consider.

He also hopes they will keep Singapore safe, establish a more caring and inclusive society, and continue to grow the economy at a sustainable rate "in harmony with na-

ture", with employers and the Government stepping in to help those who will be laid off as the economy restructures.

"We should not abandon the displaced workers because we don't want more and more Singaporeans to become Grab drivers or, worse, to join the ranks of the angry voters," he said.

"Remember this: It was the angry voters who helped to elect President (Donald) Trump in the United States. It was the angry voters in the United Kingdom who voted to leave the European Union."

The veteran diplomat also said Singapore should elevate the importance of Asean in its economic agenda as the regional grouping is the one bright spot in an otherwise gloomy global economic outlook.

This means investing and trading more with Asean countries, encouraging Singaporeans to learn an Asean language, and reorienting school trips, internships and university exchange programmes towards Asean countries. "What we need is a whole-of-country reorientation to Asean," Prof Koh said.

In addition, Singapore must become a thought leader in the field of the environment and development, in areas such as green technology and green finance.

The Republic has lost its lead to countries such as Japan and South Korea in these areas, Prof Koh pointed out. "The reason is that we have become timid and risk-averse," he said, adding more could be done to promote the use of solar energy and electric vehicles.

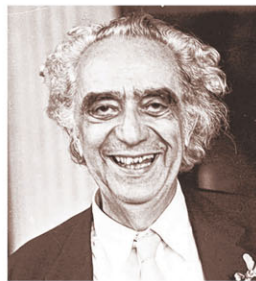
He also recounted an anecdote involving former foreign minister S. Rajaratnam and founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew.

Mr Rajaratnam had suggested Mr David Marshall – Singapore's first chief minister and founder of the Workers' Party – for the post of Singapore's ambassador to France.

Mr Lee was taken aback by the proposal, given that Mr Marshall was their political opponent. But years later, he honoured Mr Rajaratnam for his magnanimity in victory. Prof Koh urged Singapore's next-



Professor Tommy Koh (far left) speaking at a dialogue at the Singapore Bicentennial Conference yesterday, with *The Straits Times* editor Warren Fernandez (centre), who was chairing the panel, and Bloomberg News editor-in-chief John Micklethwait. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY



Former foreign minister S. Rajaratnam had suggested Workers' Party founder and political opponent David Marshall (above) for the post of Singapore's ambassador to France. ST FILE PHOTO

generation leaders to embrace this same virtue, noting that criticism should be welcomed as long as the critic loves Singapore.

"Guided by this virtue, the Government should not have banned

Tan Pin Pin's film *To Singapore, With Love*. It should not have withdrawn the book grants from Sonny Liew and Jeremy Tiang," he said.

The film and books depict leftists in ways that run counter to the official narrative.

"Why? The contestation of ideas is a necessary part of democracy. We should therefore not blacklist intellectuals, artists, writers because they criticise the Government or hold dissenting views."

He added: "Singapore will languish if our lovers are uncritical and our critics are unloving. What Singapore needs is not sycophants but loving critics and critical lovers."

In his speech, Prof Koh acknowledged that times have changed significantly since Singapore's early years of independence, when its founding leaders mobilised people and pushed through visionary development projects with no guarantee of success.

Singapore's success has naturally made it more cautious and conser-

vative, he said. "However, certain things are timeless. I would like to say that our fourth-generation leader must have fire in his or her belly," Prof Koh said.

Such a leader must have courage and must not be intimidated by domestic or external foes, he added.

"At the same time, a fourth-generation leader must be an independent thinker who is willing to go where no one else has gone before. To survive and prosper, Singapore should be a leader in innovation, not a camp follower."

Prof Koh said he has "full confidence" in the ability, commitment and integrity of Singapore's 4G leadership. "They will inherit from their predecessors a Singapore which is a great success."

He added: "What is already very good can still be improved, and it is in this spirit that I dare to submit some ideas for the consideration of our fourth prime minister."

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## Singaporeans can be more civic-minded, considerate, says Prof Koh

Veteran diplomat Tommy Koh laments that Singapore is a First World country with Third World people. Many Singaporeans lack the civic-mindedness that citizens of an advanced country should have, he said yesterday.

"I am more critical of Singaporeans than of the Government. Many of our people don't give a damn for the environment when they should. Many of our people are selfish and unkind. Just look at the way they drive," Prof Koh said, drawing laughter from his audience.

He was at the Singapore Bicentennial Conference, organised by the

Institute of Policy Studies.

Fellow panellist, Bloomberg News editor-in-chief John Micklethwait, pointed out that meritocracy has created its own problems, both in Singapore and other cosmopolitan capital cities. In such cities, the result is "a tribe of people who are working insanely hard to keep pushing ahead", often pumping money and resources into their children.

"That is a very good thing for your children, but it means society gets a bit harder for others to catch up, and that is one of the dilemmas of a modern country," he said.

He recounted how a friend had

attended a dinner at which none of the guests, including Singaporeans, could understand why people in the United Kingdom had voted for Brexit. "Nobody could understand why anybody had voted for Donald Trump. Nobody could understand why the protesters in Hong Kong had anything to protest about at all," he said.

The troubling conclusion his friend came to was that the guests, though from different parts of the world, had far more in common with one another than those living a block away from them. "He worried that his children only ran into poor

people when they were delivering their Internet shopping," he said, adding that societies must find a solution to be more inclusive.

Prof Koh called for Singapore to set a poverty line and raise workers' pay, saying top executives are paid "New York and London wages", while the bulk of workers continue to earn Third World wages.

He noted that companies used to practise profit-sharing, with a portion of the profit distributed to all employees at the end of the year, but this had been abandoned.

The average bus worker here earns a monthly wage of \$3,600, he

said. But the chief executives of the bus companies can be paid in excess of \$1 million a year, with one paid between \$1.75 million and \$2 million a year. He asked: "Is this fair? Is running a bus company rocket science?"

"There seems to be an obscene race in Singapore between our leading financial institutions and companies. The obscene race is to see who can pay the CEO more. So \$7 million not enough; \$10 million, maybe \$20 million. Have they ever asked themselves what is the median income of the employees? What is the Gini coefficient of the company?" he asked.

Asked whether there is an alternative to capitalism, Prof Koh said the question to ask is what kind of capitalism Singapore wants.

Moral capitalism is where companies consider themselves accountable to not only shareholders but to wider society, where they care for the environment and employees, and champion gender equality and diversity, he said.

He added that he had many ideas for Singaporeans, which he will write about in his next few columns for *The Straits Times*.

Linette Lai

## Question on China taking a leaf from S'pore's book sparks debate

A question on the relationship between China and Singapore sparked debate at the Singapore Bicentennial Conference yesterday. Institute of Policy Studies deputy director for research Gillian Koh had pointed to a New York Times opinion piece on China, which argued one reason for the longevity of the Chinese Communist Party's regime is that it has taken a leaf from the book of how Singapore is governed.

Professor Tommy Koh, an ambassador-at-large, said this comparison is inappropriate as there are fundamental differences in the political systems of both countries.

Unlike Chinese citizens, Singaporeans enjoy universal suffrage and many political parties are allowed to contest for power in regular elections, he said on a panel moderated by Mr Warren Fernandez, editor of *The Straits Times* and editor-in-chief of Singapore Press Holdings' English/Malay/Tamil Media Group.

"I would never dream of comparing China with Singapore because they are so incredibly different," responded Mr John Micklethwait, Bloomberg News editor-in-chief. "But I do think it is fair to say that China could learn from Singapore about government, and I think, used to quite a lot." He added that the level at which China seems to

LESSONS FROM SINGAPORE

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Bloomberg News editor-in-chief.

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**PROFESSOR TOMMY KOH**,  
Ambassador-at-large

be drawing lessons from Singapore seems to have declined slightly.

"Singapore is too small and too unique to be a model for China; for anybody else," Prof Koh re-

sponded, adding that it is not true that interactions between both countries have become less intense. Instead, both sides learn from each other today, he said.

Added Mr Micklethwait: "Five years ago, when I went to China, there was much more talk about Singapore being something that people were following."

Both gave their views on how US-China relations, which have become strained since Mr Donald Trump's election as United States President, could pan out.

"I am a natural-born optimist, but on US-China relations, I am pessimistic," Prof Koh said. "I fear that as this rivalry becomes more intense and more acrimonious, each side will not accept neutrality and will expect us to take sides. I hope that evil day will never come."

He and Mr Micklethwait agreed that China's rise goes beyond trade or technology disputes, but poses a more fundamental threat to America's position in the global order.

The current contest between both countries is a very long-term one, Mr Micklethwait added.

"I think the biggest mistake the Chinese made was imagining this was somehow just Trump," he said. "In America, they feel the dragon's breath on their shoulders."

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