

By Invitation

Five tests of a truly First World people

Singaporeans live in a First World city but have some very bad habits. To be a First World people, let's stop littering, be considerate and remember our basic manners.



Tommy Koh

For *The Straits Times*

At the Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Bicentennial Conference on Oct 1, I made the comment that Singapore is a First World country with a Third World people.

What I meant was that Singapore has many first-rate aspects such as a dynamic economy and excellent quality of life, but that some of our habits as a people did not match those standards.

But on reflection, I should not have used the term, Third World. Several of my friends have pointed out to me that the peoples of some poor countries are kind, gracious and civic-minded. They are right. Indeed, I have friends from across the world, including many from less-developed or Third World countries.

In this essay, I wish to focus on what Singaporeans must do in order to qualify as a First World people. They must pass the following tests.

TEST NO. 1

The first test for Singaporeans to pass is to stop littering. First World people such as the Japanese, South Koreans and Taiwanese do not litter.

In fact, they will pick up litter and dispose of it. They will also confront litterbugs and put peer pressure on them to pick up the litter.

Singapore used to be a dirty and smelly city. When the People's Action Party came to power in 1959, one of the first things it did was to campaign for a clean Singapore. Nine campaigns were held in the 1960s, three in the 1970s and four in the 1980s to mobilise public opinion and alter the behaviour of Singaporeans towards their environment.

As a result of the campaigns, Singapore has become known throughout the world as a clean city. However, in recent years, more and more Singaporeans have reverted to their old habit. When I look around Singapore today, I see trash everywhere.

Mr Liak Teng Lit, former chairman of the Public Hygiene Council (PHC), which leads the Keep Singapore Clean Movement, was right when he said that Singapore is not a clean city. It is a cleaned city. That is an observation



current PHC chairman Edward D'Silva agrees with.

Mr Liak once compared Singapore unfavourably with Taipei. Singapore, with a population of five million, has 70,000 cleaners. Taipei city, with a population of about 2.7 million, has about 5,000 cleaners. In Taiwan, all the schools are cleaned by their students and not by professional cleaners.

We should consider adopting this practice.

Next April 26 is a chance for Singaporeans to clean up their own estates, as town councils have agreed to give cleaners a day off on that day. Instead, it will be residents who will have to clean up their own estates themselves.

The CleanSG Day initiative aims to show "the bulk of heartland residents in Housing and Development Board flats" what happens when litter in public areas is not cleared and to encourage them to keep their estates clean. I urge Singaporeans to embrace the initiative and to step up to keep their estates clean on that day, and to continue the practice every day after that.

TEST NO. 2

The second test is to have public toilets that are as clean as those in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan.

Singapore's public toilets used to be filthy. The situation has changed for the better because of the joint efforts of a non-governmental organisation and the Government.

There is a remarkable Singaporean called Jack Sim, who founded the Restroom Association (Singapore) and the World Toilet

Organisation. With his charisma and missionary zeal, he has made a huge impact on Singapore and the world. It was due to his suggestion that Singapore managed to convince the United Nations to designate Nov 19 as World Toilet Day.

The Restroom Association (Singapore) and the National Environment Agency (NEA) have campaigned for clean public toilets in Singapore. They award three stars to public toilets that meet their minimum standard. The best public toilets, such as those at Changi Airport and Jewel, are given the maximum of six stars.

About 70 per cent of the public toilets in Singapore have been given stars. But the remaining 30 per cent, found in markets, hawker centres, coffee shops and even some restaurants, are still very Third World. A First World people should know how to keep their public toilets clean.

TEST NO. 3

The third test is the test of civic-mindedness and good manners. What are some basic good habits Singaporeans have forsaken? I think many Singaporeans have forgotten how to say "Please" and "Thank you".

When a lift or train door opens, some Singaporeans rush in without waiting for those inside the lift or train to make their exit first. When riding on an escalator, some Singaporeans do not conform to the rule of standing on the left side of the escalator to allow those in a hurry to pass them.

On the trains, some young

Singaporeans choose to ignore the priority seating sign and instead sit on seats that are reserved for people with disabilities, the elderly and pregnant women. This lack of civic-mindedness is deplorable.

In the hawker centres, many Singaporeans refuse to comply with the request to deposit their trays, plates and bowls in the designated areas after their meals. Many also fail to clean up their tables after their meals.

I also object to the behaviour of some Singaporeans who talk loudly on their mobile phones in restaurants and movie theatres. Some Singaporeans even do not refrain from talking during concerts. In First World countries, people do not commit such inconsiderate behaviour.

A First World people should be active volunteers and generous philanthropists. Due to the leadership of the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre, we are making progress in both areas, but we could do better.

TEST NO. 4

The fourth test is the test of cultural literacy. A First World people is a cultured people. A cultured people should be gracious and kind. A cultured people should treat those who serve them with courtesy and appreciation.

A cultured people should have an appreciation of culture and the arts. They should read books and show respect for our poets and writers. They should listen to music, visit our museums and take an interest in our history and heritage.

In recent years, many

Singaporeans have shown an interest in our heritage and culture. This trend is very encouraging.

TEST NO. 5

The fifth test is our attitude towards nature and the environment.

A First World people should love nature and care for the environment. They should know, for example, that climate change poses an existential threat to Singapore and the world.

I think the Singapore Government gets it but I am not sure whether the people do. Many Singaporeans do not understand that most of the energy we consume is produced by power plants using natural gas and that carbon dioxide is emitted in the process. They may not understand that the more energy they use, the more carbon dioxide they are contributing to the atmosphere.

I do not understand why so many Singaporeans insist on setting the thermostats in offices, hotels, restaurants and clubs at 18 deg C, when our comfort level is 23 deg C and the NEA has recommended that we set thermostats at 25 deg C.

Singaporeans waste a lot of energy by over-conditioning their premises. In this way, they are contributing to climate change. I wage a daily struggle with hotels, restaurants and clubs to persuade them to reset their thermostats to 23 deg C. We need the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources (MEWR) and the NEA to do more on energy saving and efficiency.

Singaporeans show the same irresponsible attitude towards food and water. Wastage is high. Food waste has risen 40 per cent over the past years, from 568,000 tonnes disposed of by households and the food industry in 2008 to around 809,800 tonnes in 2017.

Another distressing habit is for patrons to ask for more water at the end of a meal and for wait staff to fill the glasses to the brim. Many patrons end up taking a few sips of the water and wasting the rest. I see many tables with full glasses of water when patrons leave.

There is so much precious water wasted every day in most restaurants and hotels this way. I strongly support the campaign by the MEWR to make Singapore a zero-waste society. I urge Singapore to have the courage to ban bottled water. Bottled water is qualitatively no better than our tap water and it does a lot of harm to the environment.

CONCLUSION

At the risk of making myself the most unpopular man in Singapore, I stand by my comment that Singaporeans are not a First World people.

I hope that we will pass the five tests I have posed. Only then can we say that Singaporeans are a First World people.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Professor Tommy Koh is rector of Tembusu College, National University of Singapore.