

‘Escalator of progress must keep moving’

DPM says income inequality can be tackled only if society keeps doing better

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To tackle income inequality, Singapore first must ensure that everyone in society – including those in the middle class – continues to progress, said Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam.

Mr Tharman gave the analogy of being on an escalator, which has to keep moving so that everyone is better off.

“There is no point being better off than someone else if everyone is stuck in the same place,” he said.

He noted that if the escalator breaks down and stops, there will be pervasive anxiety among many in society about “who is ahead of me and getting further away, and who is behind me and catching up with me”.

Mr Tharman made this point during a dialogue last night moderated by Ambassador-at-large Tommy Koh at the 30th anniversary dinner of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) at Marina Bay Sands.

Their discussion centred on the two topics that have dominated the national discourse in recent weeks – inequality and social mobility.

Mr Tharman said the key to tackling these issues is to ensure that everyone in society keeps doing better over time.



(From left) DPM Tharman Shanmugaratnam and Professor Tommy Koh at the dialogue at the IPS 30th anniversary dinner. TNP PHOTO: **ALPHONSUS CHERN**

“Once you get stagnation in the middle of society over a long period of time, which is what happened in the United States and a range of other advanced economies, inequality becomes a much sharper and much more brittle issue and the politics of inequality acquires a momentum of its own.”

An escalator that continues to carry everyone upwards also makes it much easier for a country to have social mobility, he said.

“There are more opportunities, new skills to be learnt, new jobs to be obtained. It becomes much easier to achieve relative

mobility when you have absolute mobility – what I get is not at the expense of someone else.”

Mr Tharman also made the point that “a good part” of inequality in Singapore is generational, and a by-product of its success.

He noted that among Singaporeans who are now in their 50s, well over 60 per cent have no more than a secondary school education.

But in the past few decades, the Republic has transformed its education system and opened up a lot more opportunities for its younger generations.

Safeguarding social mobility

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– Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam

will also get more difficult as Singapore progresses, because that is the nature of a meritocratic system, Mr Tharman noted.

In response to a point made by Prof Koh that society is becoming more stratified, Mr Tharman said Singaporeans are not as class-conscious as people in many other countries that he is familiar with, and that it should strive to maintain this attitude, and made a call for mixing across social classes.

In closing the dialogue, Prof Koh recited the lyrics to Bob Dylan’s “Workingman’s Blues”, a song about the plight of blue-collar workers.

Responding, Mr Tharman referred to a 1960s hit by British group The Hollies: “I can’t resist adding – what should always be in our mind is he ain’t heavy, because he’s my brother.”

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