

# Policies must adapt to changing families, society: Desmond Lee

Singapore must find new common spaces as country grows more ethnically diverse

**Yasmine Yahya**  
Senior Political Correspondent

Singapore needs to keep reviewing its policies to accommodate people and families in different circumstances, from single-parent homes to never-married singles, Social and Family Development Minister Desmond Lee said yesterday.

Also, as society becomes more ethnically diverse, the country has to find new common spaces and ways to sustain social cohesion, he added.

These two strands of societal change were highlighted by Mr Lee when he spoke about diversity at a conference held at Marina Bay Sands to mark the Institute of Pol-

icy Studies' (IPS) 30th anniversary.

The concept of the Singaporean family now includes reconstituted families formed by divorcees who remarry, and people who delay marriage or do not marry at all. Their numbers are going up, he said.

He also cited the emergence of non-traditional households, such as cohabiting heterosexual and homosexual couples, and families in which older siblings take on the role of parents to their younger siblings.

"Our social policies balance between strong support for family and marriage and making space for the increasingly prominent diversity in family and social forms.

"We must continue to review our policies to accommodate fami-

lies in different circumstances," Mr Lee said.

The other change is that Singaporean families today are more culturally diverse as more citizens marry people of a different race or nationality. "With this, there are more inter-ethnic babies, more young people growing up with diverse cultures and mixed-race identities," he said.

Immigration is also adding to Singapore's cultural diversity, he added.

Singapore Management University professor of sociology Paulin Straughan, who spoke after Mr Lee, asked if Singapore's "Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others" (CMIO) model will soon be irrelevant. She noted that more than half of the marriages last year involved transnational and inter-ethnic couples, and the children of these multicultural households may eventually form the majority in Singapore.



(From left) Social and Family Development Minister Desmond Lee, National University of Singapore associate professor of law Eleanor Wong and Singapore Management University sociology professor Paulin Straughan at yesterday's IPS conference at the Marina Bay Sands Convention Centre. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

"So, moving forward, we need concrete plans as we curate the Singapore identity, to remember that we have multicultural families and new citizens."

Mr Lee agreed, but added that the CMIO construct has served Singapore well by enabling conversations among large community groups that did not originally see themselves as a united society.

Over the years, it has helped the country build a national identity.

But as each new generation seeks to renew the compact, the common spaces of today may not be enough,

he said, adding: "We need to find new common spaces, new ways to dialogue in the real world and virtual space."

Another topic discussed was 377A, the Penal Code section that criminalises sex between men. People argue for its repeal may want it to happen sooner rather than later, but substantial social change takes time and needs persuasive discussions, Mr Lee and Professor Straughan said.

Mr Lee said: "In issues such as this - fraught with emotion, personal values, very contrasting visions of what the future will look like - the

dialogue must continue, be robust and respectful. Our children must decide for themselves."

Prof Straughan added: "No one should feel they have to live with less because they are born different."

The question, she said, is what the best way forward is: "Is it charging head-on and disrupting everyday life, or is it through persuasive engagement? I don't have the answer, but I do think... we should leverage the gains we have made so we can climb higher together."

yasmine@sph.com.sg

# Aim to be anti-elitism, not anti-excellence, urges Chan Chun Sing

Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing met a group of students from Anglo-Chinese School (Independent) recently, and he said some felt that people were making fun of them, saying they were being elitist.

"I told them this - that being in ACS (I) is not elitist; you did well to get to where you are.

"But if you are in ACS (I) and you forget or refuse to reach out to those people who are less privileged, then I think that is the definition of elitism."

Mr Chan recounted the event yesterday at a conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies, as he sought to make it clear that Singaporeans should aim not to be anti-excellence, but anti-elitism.

It underlines his message at a panel discussion on income inequality and social mobility, that people should look past a person's income or status, and that the successful in society have a responsibility to give back to society and be volunteers to help the underprivileged.

The discussion took a jocular turn when at one point he asked the 820 people in the audience, comprising

academics, senior civil servants and students, a rhetorical question: "So, since I am now a minister, I presume that qualifies me as a member of the elite?"

The response from *The Straits Times'* Opinion editor Chua Mui Hoong, who was also on the panel, drew laughter and applause: "Yes - a member of the political elite, a member of the academic aristocracy benefiting from a state-sponsored scholarship and elite by virtue of income and education."

Mr Chan pushed back, arguing that as someone who grew up in a poor, single-parent household and had to work hard to achieve his present success, he should not be labelled a member of the elite class.

"There is a difference between anti-elitism and anti-excellence," he said.

"I would not hold it against somebody, regardless of his background, if he does well and makes a contribution to society. But if someone has done well, not through his own effort but maybe through his connections... and doesn't reach out to peo-



Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing at yesterday's panel discussion on income inequality and social mobility with (from left) *The Straits Times'* Opinion editor Chua Mui Hoong, Channel NewsAsia's senior producer and presenter for international news Dawn Tan, and Singapore Press Holdings' Chinese Media Group NewsHub editor Han Yong May. Mr Chan said the successful have a responsibility to give back to society and help the underprivileged. ST PHOTO: JONATHAN CHOO

ple, then that is different."

He added that in his Buona Vista ward, which is part of Tanjong Pagar GRC, he is MP to the richest and poorest in Singapore.

When the wealthy ask him how they can give back, he often tells them he needs their time and talent more than their money, he said.

Making a direct plea to his audi-

ence, he said: "If only each and every one of you could adopt one family, reach out to that family every week and give the children a positive role model to look up to, that I think is much more important than any monetary help."

In the question-and-answer session, Singapore Management University sociology professor Paulin

Straughan highlighted a concern among today's youth who feel it has become harder for them to enjoy the same degree of social mobility their parents did. This has made them unhappy and eroded their optimism.

Mr Chan, in his response, indicated it is his generation's responsibility to help today's young.

Those who are successful need

"to uphold, refine and continuously improve the system so that the next generation can continue to succeed, just like us", he said.

"The definition of our success is not how well we do for ourselves, but how well we enable the next generation to do better than us," he added.

Yasmine Yahya

# Slowing down economic growth will not help create more equal society: Josephine Teo

**Linette Lai**

Deliberately slowing down Singapore's economic growth will not help tackle inequality, but will instead make everybody worse off, Manpower Minister Josephine Teo said yesterday.

"It will have the harshest impact on the bottom," Mrs Teo said. "Jobs will be lost and incomes will fall for those at the lower end of the workforce while, at the top end, those with the talent or entrepreneurial ability to seize opportunities elsewhere will up and go."

She was speaking at a panel discussion during a conference organised to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Institute of Policy Studies at Marina Bay Sands.

She pointed out that slowing down growth "so that those behind can catch up" may sound like an intuitive solution to inequality, but the evidence suggests the reverse.

Much of Singapore's growth since 2000 took place between 2004 and 2007, when its gross domestic product grew by an average of 8 per cent yearly.

Median income adjusted for inflation grew by 20 per cent during that decade, and "virtually all" of it happened during that four-year period.

"By going for growth when the conditions allowed, we offset the downturns we experienced earlier in the decade," Mrs Teo said.

"In the process, we reduced unemployment and raised wages for Singaporeans after the standstill in



the first part of the decade." She added that slow growth will not ensure a more equal society as long as Singaporeans live in a globalised world.

Her comments came after Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam said on Thursday that to tackle income inequality, Singapore must first ensure that everyone in society - including those in the middle class - continues to progress. He gave the analogy of being on an escalator, which has to keep moving so that everyone is better off.

Mrs Teo's fellow panellist, Nominated MP Walter Theseira, also spoke about inequality and social mobility in Singapore.

The labour economist, an associate professor at the Singapore University of Social Sciences, said the basic problem is that income inequality "has a very high chance of reproducing itself".

Addressing this problem will

mean that we have to weigh the trade-offs, he said.

"A completely redistributive society is going to fail. So, too, will a society that fails to ask those who are better off among us for more.

"We have to weigh the trade-offs. There is a real cost to having an equal society."

Mrs Teo also addressed calls to implement a minimum wage, saying it could lead to lower levels of employment as not all employers would want to employ workers at that rate.

Schemes like the Workfare Income Supplement, which provides support to the bottom 20 per cent of workers, achieve "the same uplift as a minimum wage".

"But there is a crucial difference," she said. "The cost is borne by the Government, with no risk of inducing unemployment or illegal employment of such workers."

linettel@sph.com.sg

Manpower Minister Josephine Teo speaking at the panel discussion yesterday on income inequality and social mobility with Singapore University of Social Sciences labour economist Walter Theseira. The discussion was chaired by adjunct senior research fellow Manu Bhaskaran of the Institute of Policy Studies. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO