

# Long-term solutions needed, not quick fixes with populist appeal: Ong

**Rei Kurohi**

The solutions to complex problems of the day may lie in the middle, but the middle is often boring and rarely appeals naturally to populism, Education Minister Ong Ye Kung said yesterday.

“It requires tedious explanation, balancing of trade-offs and back-breaking implementation work. It is hard to boil down to a crisp rallying call, compared to the stirring rhetoric at the extremes,” he said.

Mr Ong said this might be the reason for the shrinking political middle observed in the West, where

places like the United States, Britain and Germany are seeing increasing polarisation and divisiveness.

One exception is France, where President Emmanuel Macron’s centrist party still commands a majority in Parliament. Mr Ong said this could be because France still has a large percentage of young people who have a lot of hope for the future.

He was speaking on the third day of the inaugural Festival of Ideas organised by the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. The school marks its 15th anniversary this year. The four-day symposium on the topic of governance for the future ends today.

Governance is becoming more

challenging globally, and it may even be in crisis, said Mr Ong.

The fact that the political centre has ceded ground to the extremes has impacted discourse on key issues of the day, he noted.

“Technology is disrupting industries, creating new jobs while displacing workers at the same time. The impact is drastically uneven throughout society, creating both booms and busts for individual lives,” Mr Ong said.

While big technology companies paint a rosy outcome for the future, there have also been calls to break up these firms, put a tax on robots and introduce measures like a universal

basic income to cushion the impact on affected workers, he added.

He noted that globalisation has also been controversial, particularly in the aspect of immigration.

“When the doors of countries become more open, they attract immigrants, which will unsettle local populations if the numbers are excessive. There is a genuine fear about a loss of a nation’s identity.”

And climate change has seen prominent people denying global warming despite the scientific evidence before them, Mr Ong said. “We also have activists admonishing world leaders to stop talking about ‘money and fairy tales of eternal eco-

conomic growth’ and advocating for global measures that can potentially deprive developing countries of a fair chance for economic growth.”

Mr Ong said these issues often resonate emotionally, but the simplistic solutions spouted are essentially that – simplistic. There are no quick fixes, he added, only long-term and consistent strategies that will take time to show results.

For example, to cope with technological disruptions, perhaps what is needed is an “inclusive growth model that is productivity and innovation driven”, which means every enterprise and company doing its part to upgrade and

be more efficient, he said.

Significant efforts are perhaps required to educate the young and re-train adults, Mr Ong added.

An ageing world coupled with rising inequality will likely mean the need for stronger social safety nets, he said.

But perhaps more, or equally, important is systemic intervention by dedicated social workers to help families succeed and children break out of the poverty cycle.

Mr Ong said: “If we still believe in the politics of the middle, then we need to give thought and voice to its rationality, its analysis of trade-offs and longer-term perspectives.”

The Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy can play a significant role in this by dedicating itself to research in public policy, he added.

rei@sph.com.sg