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particular communities.

THE WAY FORWARD

Class and inequality can only be mitigated if the Government and citizens work in concert.

For this to happen, high levels of public trust in the Government to care for all citizens rather than just a select few must continue. There is a need for agile communication and proactiveness in reaching out to groups that may harbour concerns or disillusionment.

Singapore's proactive policy stances to mitigate class divides and other fault lines such as those on race and religion should continue – ranging from more robust social safety nets to market interventions allocating portions of prime land for public housing.

Various measures have been instituted in recent years – such as GST and U-Save vouchers, strengthening educational opportunities with the KidStart and Uplift initiatives, and priority admissions to MOE kindergartens for children from lower-income households.

The use of Budgets as an annual implement to alleviate inequalities continues to be critical. In 2020, Singapore's Gini coefficient – a measure of inequality – was 0.375 after Government transfers, the city-state's best performance since 2000.

This was primarily due to augmented household transfers for lower-income groups even amid Covid-19. It exemplifies how the Government's focus on providing greater support for those with greater needs continues to be relevant in the context of a free-market economy, especially in times of crises.

Amid the "hardware" and policy instruments to bridge class divides, the "software" is essential, too, in a competitive, meritocratic society where it is all too easy to descend into self-entitlement and self-centredness.

In this regard, Singaporeans should embark on a mindset shift when perusing issues of class. Views and commentary should be shaped with nuance and empathy, rather than hate or apathy, even if we sometimes feel disdain towards the lifestyles of those from different classes.

This will enable discourse to be based on mutual respect and understanding, so that groups are sensitive to and aware of what it feels like to be the "other".

More privileged individuals should endeavour to be more "woke", or awake and aware of difficulties felt by marginalised communities.

These underscore our focus on what unites, rather than what divides us in our national narratives, even as we debate the way forward in addressing class divides.

Only then, can we move meaningfully towards a socially cohesive future.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Mathew Mathews is head of the social lab and principal research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore. Melvin Tay is research associate in the society and culture department at the IPS.

Class divisions: The risks to Singapore's cohesion

Reactions to the fuel tax hike show the potential for perceptions of unfairness – and populist exploitation. Current proactive policies to mitigate class divides and other fault-lines must continue.

Mathew Mathews and Melvin Tay

For *The Straits Times*

A look at the effects on people of one measure introduced in last week's Budget 2021, the hike in petrol duty rates, illustrates class-based divisions that have implications for social cohesion. If left unchecked, these divisions may result in a rise of populism.

While class divisions normally pertain to property ownership, income and education, they are also associated with one's profession or mode of commute. For more affluent car owners, the fuel hike will cause concern due to its direct, immediate impact on costs of living. On the other hand, it has little effect on public transport commuters, and so their response is muted or indifferent.

However, for delivery, taxi and private-hire drivers, who contend

with fluctuating incomes and protracted working hours, the hike has a direct impact on their take-home pay – and so they will have a strong reaction. It should be noted though, there are road tax and petrol duty rebates to cushion the impact.

Such varied views are part of a broader divide on whether the Government should take more responsibility to ensure all are provided for, as opposed to individuals being responsible for their economic well-being.

A recent Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) report based on responses of over 2,000 Singapore residents to the World Values Survey noted that lower-educated and less well-off respondents were considerably more likely to feel the onus was on the Government to provide for all citizens, as opposed to their more privileged counterparts.

The same report also found marked class differences on whether we should prioritise the environment over

economic growth.

Even among younger respondents who are more aware of environmental issues, only 55 per cent of those who lived in one- to three-room flats indicated a preference to protect the environment, compared to 68 per cent in private property.

This could perhaps be due to the costs of protecting our environment – such as raising petrol duties and imposing taxes on the use of plastic bags – having a disproportionate impact on the disposable incomes of the less affluent.

Additionally, reactions to measures targeted specifically at helping locals, such as the SGUnited Jobs and Skills Package announced in the Budget, would also have differed across the populace.

Affluence is one of the most significant factors influencing views on whether employers should prioritise Singaporeans over immigrants when hiring. The IPS report found while over four-fifths of the least educated and least affluent agreed with this, under three-quarters of the most educated, most affluent individuals indicated likewise.

This trend parallels views on broader precepts about how economy and society is organised in Singapore. The same report found that over two-thirds and over three-quarters of the most

educated and most affluent locals respectively perceived economic competition as being a good thing, compared to just half of their least educated, least affluent peers.

Given that highly educated and affluent individuals are the beneficiaries of a competitive, merit-based system, it is unsurprising they are more receptive to competition in the economy.

THE THREAT OF POPULISM

Class divisions, if left to fester, may have insidious consequences.

Populist movements such as Trumpism in the United States, Euroscepticism in Europe, and Duterteism in the Philippines, are born of educational and income-based differences, and appeal to ordinary citizens who feel their concerns have been snubbed.

These political stances often rise to prominence on the back of underlying cynicism and binary "us versus them" narratives, pitting laypeople against elites and leaders seen to be the victors reaping the spoils of an unfair system.

The outcomes arising from populism are often more destructive than constructive, with social cohesion supplanted by polarisation, and community goodwill and empathy for others

displaced by disillusionment and distrust.

Prospects for such radical movements to take root in Singapore may seem remote.

After all, the prevailing blend of politics in Parliament advanced by both the ruling People's Action Party and the 10 opposition members from the Workers' Party seems to be one centred on forging trust, engagement, and consensus.

Yet, the preconditions for fault lines to deepen and destroy are all too present. Alongside marked differences in views and policy preferences across class, the sense of disconnect between a minority of Singaporeans and the Government is worrying.

The IPS report found that 15 per cent of local residents supported a complete overhaul of the way Singapore society is organised, rather than merely incremental changes to achieve social change.

Singaporeans understand the consequences of fault lines predicated on class divisions. In a 2019 IPS study on fault lines, only 12 per cent of respondents believed that there would be no consequences if class differences were not managed well.

In contrast, 37 per cent believed that mismanaging class divisions would result in a loss of trust in Government, while about the same proportion believed there would be anger against