

S'pore's multiracialism: Embrace diversity and seek common ground

Hariz Baharudin

To achieve racial harmony, Singapore did not ask any of its communities to give up parts of their culture, and instead embraced the diversity they offered, said Finance Minister Lawrence Wong.

Speaking at a forum on race and racism yesterday, Mr Wong held up Singapore's model of multiculturalism, which he said is distinct from that of other nations.

"We did not set out to achieve racial harmony by creating a monolithic society. Our multiracialism does not require any community to give up its heritage or traditions," he said.

He stressed that Singapore does not devalue diversity, but instead accepts and celebrates it.

Multiracialism does not mean forgetting the separate identities people have, and does not require the erasure of cultural differences and histories in favour of a "bland and homogenised broth", he said.

"Instead, it enjoins us to embrace our inheritances, respect those of others, and go beyond them to encompass a national identity and shared purpose."

He pointed out that Singapore's way differs from the French way, for example, which insists on assimilation into one master language and culture. People in France have to speak French, accept French ways and assimilate into French society.

For its part, Singapore decided to encourage each community to take pride in its own cultures and traditions while seeking common ground and strengthening a shared



A chariot procession leaving the Sri Layan Sithi Vinayagar Temple in Keong Saik Road on Jan 27, the eve of Thaipusam. In Singapore, each community is encouraged to take pride in its own traditions. ST PHOTO: YONG LI XUAN

sense of belonging and identity.

Mr Wong recounted how the late theatre doyen Kuo Pao Kun had likened culture to trees. "This is what we are constantly striving to do. Go deeper to strengthen our cultural roots, and at the same time, reach higher to cross-pollinate with other cultures, and thus develop a stronger shared Singa-

porean identity," Mr Wong said.

The Republic's bilingualism policy is an important part of its approach to multiracialism as it allows children here to access traditions that the vernacular languages carry, he said. This is so they would know who they are, instead of becoming "pale imitations of Europeans or Americans".

Much effort is made to preserve these languages, he said, noting that this involves steps such as insisting that schoolchildren study their mother tongues.

Parliament provides simultaneous translations in all four official languages as well, even though all MPs can understand and speak English well, he said.

He acknowledged criticism that government policies to preserve and develop cultures could make Singapore more race-conscious and detract from multiracialism.

The Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools are sometimes cited to make this point, he said, adding that he understands the concerns surrounding them. The Government will continue to see how multiracialism can be strengthened across all schools, he pledged.

But he asked critics of SAP schools to consider if society here would be better off if standards of vernacular languages were to fall, and Singaporean Chinese, Malay and Indian cultures were to wither and dissipate.

"For that is the primary reason for the SAP schools. They were pure Chinese-medium schools before. We retained some of them in this new form so we can still have a sufficient number of bilingual and

bicultural students, equally strong in English as well as Chinese."

He said Singapore has programmes in a few schools besides SAP schools to enable students to deepen their proficiency in Malay and Tamil, and nurture their bicultural interests, among other efforts.

These efforts, and those involving a variety of Chinese, Malay and Indian cultural organisations, should not be done away with on the grounds of perpetuating racial consciousness and not being inclusive of others, he said.

"For that is not what we mean when we pledge ourselves to become 'one people, regardless of race, language or religion'. The Singaporean is not only the English-educated cosmopolitan, up to date with the latest trends in London, Paris or New York."

Singaporeans, he said, are "also our fellow citizens who are more comfortable in Mandarin, Malay, Tamil or other languages, and who have different cultural perspectives and views."

He said Singapore has also taken great care to ensure its ethnic balance remains stable because major changes can be unsettling to all groups, majority or minority.

harizbah@sph.com.sg