

Lately, several worrying incidents have given us pause to consider the state of our racial harmony.

In May, a Chinese man kicked an Indian woman in the chest while uttering racial slurs. Earlier this month, a Chinese man confronted an inter-racial couple, saying they should date within their respective races. In the same month, a Chinese woman was filmed hitting a gong to disrupt her Indian neighbour's prayer ritual.

And recently, a Malay lady was sentenced to jail for hurling racist insults at an Indian female commuter on a bus.

These racist acts are unacceptable. I feel the hurt caused. And like all of you, I wish these incidents had not happened.

Some have asked why we are experiencing this recent spate of racist incidents. They wonder if racism has gathered speed. I think we should see this in a broader context.

The government monitors closely all incidents involving race and religion, because we know how sensitive they can be. From our tracking, we know such racist incidents are not new. They were far more numerous earlier in our history, but declined gradually over the decades, although this past year has seen significantly more cases than usual, most likely because of the stress of Covid-19.

Such incidents don't always make the headlines. But racism still exists in Singapore: it is among us – in our streets, our neighbourhoods and our workplaces.

In the past, racist incidents would likely have been resolved amongst the parties involved and behind closed doors. Nowadays, the cases are highlighted on social media, and circulated more widely to a larger audience.

In a positive way, social media has helped to create greater awareness of racism here. This has made us, especially the majority, look closely in the mirror and reflect deeper about who we are, and who we want to be.

And we clearly cannot leave things as they are. We are better than this. Whether online or offline, we must hold ourselves to higher standards, and tackle racism wherever it exists in our society.

The question is: what do we do now?

How we got here: Building a Singaporean Singapore

To answer this question, we must first understand our past and how we got here.

Race is never an easy issue for any society in the world, especially highly diverse ones like ours. It is highly emotive because the question of race is wrapped up with our identities, our cultures, our ways of life. The natural instincts of humans are to look out for people who are most like us, and to keep a distance from others.

It is not impossible to overcome such discomfort, as we and other multiracial societies have shown. But we would be fooling ourselves if we believed that racial and religious harmony were the natural order of things. It does not fall ready-made from the sky. There is nothing pre-ordained about a multiracial society.

For Singapore, the question of race has been a fundamental issue from the beginning. To put it simply: If race did not pose an existential challenge, Singapore would never have separated from Malaysia, and we would never have become an independent, sovereign state.

Our 23 months in the federation showed the tendency of each race to emphasise its identity, its rights, and its primacy – often at the expense of other races. Against the grain, our founding leaders set out to build a "Singaporean Singapore".

As Mr Lee Kuan Yew declared on Aug 9, 1965: "We are going to have a multiracial nation in Singapore. We will set the example. This is not a Malay nation; this is not a Chinese nation; this is not an Indian nation. Everybody will have his place, equal..."

But our founding leaders also knew that creating a Singaporean Singapore was not simply a matter of mouthing slogans. They knew we needed deliberate policies, carefully thought out safeguards, and resolute efforts to ensure:

- (1) That minorities would be protected
- (2) That the majority would not abuse its dominance
- (3) That bigots and chauvinists from whatever race would be constrained and curbed

So the founding generation willed such a nation into existence, talking difficult and sometimes drastic steps to achieve this fundamental national ideal:

- a. They consistently refused to confine their political base only to the majority race, to the exclusion of all others
- b. They took firm action, including invoking the Internal Security Act, against chauvinists of all varieties – including Chinese chauvinists
- c. They made English – a neutral language common to all – our working language, the language of government and the main medium of instruction in our schools
- d. They changed electoral rules to guarantee that minorities would always be represented in Parliament, and that no party could prevail by narrowly appealing to any specific race and religion
- e. They amended the Constitution to create a Presidential Council on Minority Rights, chaired by the Chief Justice, with the power to reject any law passed by Parliament that infringed on the rights of minorities

Because of what they achieved, we are in a much better position today. The racial riots of the 1960s are confined to history textbooks, and Singaporeans of my generation and our children have experienced decades of peace and harmony.

We are not perfect and there's still much work to be done. But Singapore is one of the few places in the world where people of different races and faiths have lived peacefully and closely together for more than half a century.

I know not all agree with the policies we have put in place. For example, some believe the GRC system is not necessary, as Singaporeans can be trusted to vote for the best candidates, of whatever race, without the aid of the GRCs.

But look at the United States, another polyglot society. There the courts have intervened to ensure electoral districts with built-in majorities of African-Americans and Hispanics, so as to have diverse representation in their legislatures.

In Singapore, because we want racially integrated rather than segregated housing, we no longer have constituencies with built-in majorities of Indians and Malays. Instead we have the GRC system to ensure at least a minimum number of minority legislators in Parliament.

So whether it is America or Singapore, both have systems to guarantee the representation of minorities in legislatures. Both recognise you cannot have *E pluribus unum* – Out of Many, One – by simply assuming the many don't exist.

I respect the views of Singaporeans who believe we are ready to move beyond race, and so think we no longer need the GRC system. Believe me, nobody would be more pleased than the PAP leadership – past and present, from Lee Kuan Yew and S. Rajaratnam onwards – if one day we no longer needed the GRC system to ensure sufficient minority representation.

But we are not yet totally immune to the siren calls of exclusive racial and cultural identities. Neither have we reached a "post-racial" state. Surely recent events have, if anything, confirmed our caution.

Our distinctive model of multiracialism

This leads me to another important point: 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.

Ours is not the French way, insisting on assimilation into one master language and culture: speak French, accept French ways and assimilate into French society. Instead we decided to preserve, protect and celebrate our diversity.

Hence, we encourage each community to take pride in its own cultures and traditions. At the same time, we seek common ground among our communities, and aim to expand our common space and strengthen our shared sense of belonging and identity.

Our bilingual policy is a key plank in this approach. We believe that by affording our children access to the rich traditions that our vernacular languages carry, they would know who they are and won't become pale imitations of Europeans or Americans.

So we expend considerable efforts to preserve the Chinese, Malay and Tamil languages: insisting school children study their mother tongues, pouring resources in to keep up standards in the vernacular languages, and helping to sustain the

Multiracialism and faultlines

Singapore's distinctive model for racial harmony is a work in progress, and its people have to be prepared to listen to each other, even if it means uncomfortable discussions on issues such as Chinese privilege or the CMIO model. But the way forward is to find common ground, and avoid a divisive "them vs us" dynamic, says Finance Minister Lawrence Wong. Here is his speech from yesterday's IPS-RSIS Forum on Race and Racism in Singapore.



Finance Minister Lawrence Wong says Singapore did not get to where we are today through confrontation or compulsion. Nor did every community assert its own entitlements, and press its claims against others. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

vernacular media. To this day, Parliament provides simultaneous translations in all four of our official languages, though all MPs can understand and speak English well. It is an important practice which we continue to uphold – not least to let the world and our own citizens know that we are not to be confused with the West and Westerners, though English is our language of business and we are connected to the world.

Some criticise our policies to preserve and develop our component cultures. They feel such policies make us more race-conscious, and detract from multiracialism. Special Assistance Plan or SAP schools are sometimes cited to make this point.

I understand the concerns about SAP schools. We do want our young to grow up interacting with people in other communities and making friends among all races. So we will continue to see how we can strengthen multi-racialism across all our schools.

But I will ask those who criticise SAP schools to consider: would our society be better off if standards of our spoken and written 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.

Similarly, we have programmes in a few schools to enable our students to deepen their proficiency in Malay and Tamil, and to nurture their bicultural interests.

We also have madrasahs, strong vernacular media, as well as a huge variety of Chinese, Malay and Indian cultural organisations – from the Chinese Orchestra to the Malay Heritage Centre to the Indian Fine Arts Society.

Should all this be done away with on the grounds that they perpetuate racial consciousness and are not inclusive of other races, other languages, other cultures, other traditions? Obviously not, 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. The Singaporean is also our fellow citizens who are more comfortable in Mandarin, Malay, Tamil, or other languages, and who have different cultural perspectives and views.

I might quote here what Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said in 2017, at the opening of the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre. It encapsulates well how our model of multi-racialism is not to be confused with French universalism or the American "melting pot". "We are... a multiracial, multi-religious, and multi-cultural society," the Prime Minister said. "This diversity is a fundamental aspect of our respective identities. Our aim is integration, not assimilation. No race or culture in Singapore is coerced into conforming with other cultures or identities, let alone that of the majority. "Ours is not a melting pot society... Instead, we encourage each race to preserve its unique culture and traditions, while fostering mutual appreciation and respect among all of them. Being Singaporean has never been a matter of subtraction, but of addition; not of becoming less, but more; not of limitation and contraction, but of openness and expansion."

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This is our distinctive philosophy of multiracialism. We do not devalue diversity, but accept and celebrate it. Multiracialism in Singapore doesn't mean forgetting our separate racial, linguistic, religious and cultural identities. It doesn't require us to erase our rich inheritances in favour of a bland and homogenised broth.

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

I am reminded here of something that I had read by the late Kuo Pao Kun when I was at MCCY. He likened culture to trees – they are separate at the trunk but touch at the tips of their branches where cross-pollination occurs, and at the tips of their roots where they draw sustenance from the same soil.

As Pao Kun observed, it's important to move higher and deeper to realise the beauty of pluralism. 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 Singaporean identity.

Is this easy to do? No. But is it worth trying to achieve this? Yes, absolutely.

Our distinctive philosophy of multiracialism underpins our rules, laws and practices which we have developed, pragmatically, to meet our own circumstances and realities.

Sometimes, we say we must take into account race, for we cannot pretend that racial identities don't exist. So in national politics, we have been deliberate in making

sure people of all races are represented; in housing, we have consciously ensured a balanced mix of ethnic groups and avoided racial enclaves.

And on other occasions, we say let's go beyond race, let's be race blind. So in employment, in our education system, we have striven to give everyone, regardless of race or religion, equal opportunities.

Moving forward with mutual trust and accommodation

One key reason why our system has worked is because of the mutual understanding and trust forged between our communities. We did not get to where we are today through confrontation or compulsion. Nor did every community assert its own entitlements, and press its claims against others.

Instead, through mutual accommodation and compromise, we have found a balance that all can accept. No community has gotten everything it wanted. But collectively we have achieved more together than what we would otherwise have attained by just focusing on our individual agendas.

Everyone is generally comfortable, and we are all able to live harmoniously together. This is a delicate balance, but it is not a fixed position. The situation is dynamic.

Society's attitudes and conditions continue to evolve and change over time. There is now a greater mixing and interaction between races – in schools, at the workplace, in society.

Younger Singaporeans have grown up less conscious of racial differences, and more accepting of other races as compared to their parents and grandparents. More than one in five marriages in Singapore are inter-racial.

Indeed because of where we are today, there are Singaporeans who feel it is time to take a different approach on race relations – that the Government should now work on the basis that we are a race-blind society, and remove all rules and practices that underline race in various ways.

Appreciate these desires. Indeed, I share these aspirations. Perhaps I am young enough to feel the idealistic instincts of the millennials, and old enough to understand the caution born of experience of my parents' generation.

But we can all agree that our multiracialism is not perfect, and we have to keep working at it deliberately, to reduce our imperfections, step by step. Let me offer some suggestions on how we can do so.

First, we must recognise that in any multiracial society, it is harder

to be a minority than a majority. This is so everywhere in the world. So, it is important for the majority community in Singapore to do its part, and be sensitive to and conscious of the needs of minorities.

This cuts across all aspects of daily life:

- (1) It matters to someone who faces discrimination when looking for a job
- (2) It matters when someone feels left out when everyone else in a group speaks in a language that not all can understand
- (3) It matters to potential tenants who learn that landlords do not prefer their race
- (4) It matters to our students, neighbours, co-workers and friends who have to deal with stereotypes about their race, or insensitive comments

These things do happen, not always, and perhaps not even often, but sometimes. And when they do happen, they cause real hurt, which is not erased by lightly dismissing them as casual remarks or jokes.

I believe the majority community in Singapore understands this.

So I ask that we do more and take the extra step to make our minority friends, neighbours, co-workers feel comfortable. Treat others in the way you would like to be treated; and by your actions, remind your children to do the same. Remind those among your family members or friends who may slip up from time to time.

At the same time, I am grateful that minorities have reciprocated by recognising that the majority community has legitimate needs and concerns too.

In this regard, it is important to realise that the Chinese community in Singapore is not monolithic.

Sometimes people talk about "Chinese privilege" in Singapore. There may well be biases or blind spots that the Chinese community should become aware of and to rectify.

But please understand that we still have a whole generation of Chinese Singaporeans who are more comfortable in Chinese than English, and who consider themselves at a disadvantage in an English-speaking world. They feel that they have already given up much to bring about a multiracial society: Chinese-language schools, Nanyang University, dialects, and so on.

"What do you mean by 'Chinese privilege'?" they will ask, for they do not feel privileged at all. Naturally many of them would object to being so characterised.

This brings me to my second point, which is that we must continue with our approach of mutual accommodation, trust and compromise.

Let me be clear: I am not saying that we should refrain from voicing our unhappiness, or that minority Singaporeans should pipe down about the prejudices they experience. On the contrary, we should be upfront and honest about the racialised experiences various groups feel, and deal squarely with them.

We must continue to speak up, and even be prepared to have uncomfortable discussions – not to start arguments, but to begin civilised discussions, listen to each other, and understand all points of view. But we should not insist on maximum entitlements and rights for our respective groups; construe every compromise as an injustice that needs to be condemned; or put the worst interpretation on every perceived slight or insensitivity.

Because when one group jostles aggressively to assert its identity and rights over others, it will not take long before other groups feel put upon, and start to jostle back. We already see this playing out in so many places around the world: when one side uses identity politics to push their cause, it invariably emboldens another to put the ante and make greater demands. We end up fuelling our worst tendencies – our tribalism, hostility and vengefulness.

If we go down this path, insisting on differences over commonality, minority groups will not win, and the outcome will be most unhappy for the majority community too.

So I hope all groups calling for change will be conscious about how they approach the matter. It is natural to want to be heard, to want to see the changes we think ought to happen. But let's do so in ways that:

- (1) Expand the space for agreement, not narrow it
- (2) Deepen cross-cultural understanding, not cause defensiveness and suspicion
- (3) Appeal to the better angels in

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all of us, not instigate a "them vs us" dynamic.

Finally, the government will continue to engage widely, and to update our policies on race, as well as other policies that help to strengthen racial harmony in Singapore.

Our policies are not cast in stone.

For any policy – be it GRC, EIP, Self-Help Groups, or SAP schools, we continually ask ourselves: what is it that we are trying to achieve? Is the policy still relevant today? If so, can it be further fine-tuned or improved?

One current example is our review of Muslim nurses wearing the tudung with their uniform. This process entails detailed study and extensive dialogue between the government and our various communities. It cannot be rushed, nor should things be changed simply based on who shouts the loudest.

Ultimately, any change must expand our common space, and strengthen our racial harmony, while allowing each community as much room as possible to go about its way of life.

Take, for example, the ethnic balance in Singapore. Some say we should go beyond CMIO. But how would Singaporeans feel if the proportions of C, M, I and O were to shift dramatically? In fact, we have taken great care to ensure this balance remains stable for our citizen population – precisely because we understand how unsettling major changes can be to all groups, majority or minority.

You can see in the latest census report how we have maintained this balance over the decades. At the same time, we have worked hard at integrating new citizens, to ensure they too embrace our values and way of life.

Because while many new citizens are ethnically similar to us, they come from different cultural backgrounds, have not grown up or spent many years in our multiracial society, and will take time to fully appreciate or understand our multiracial approach.

Around this Singaporean core, we have gathered a transient population. They live and work here for a time, but will eventually return to their home countries.

These work pass holders are crucial to our economy. They enable us to stay competitive, attract investments, and create good jobs for Singaporeans.

We control the inflow of these migrant workers. However, it is not possible for us to ensure that their ethnic mix matches our resident population, nor that they meld seamlessly into our social fabric. So from time to time, this creates frictions and issues within and among our communities.

We understand these concerns. So we continue to review and update our work pass policies too, to ensure that they meet our economic needs, help Singapore to grow and prosper, and yet fit into our social context.

Such are the realities of living in a diverse society, in a dynamic, globalised world. We have to make constant adjustments; repeatedly check to make sure we get the balance right.

To conclude, this Government will never waver in our commitment to promote harmony among all races, and ensure that all Singaporeans enjoy full and equal opportunities in life.

Like our forefathers of all races who made this their home in 1965, we too are convinced that we must continue to strengthen our "Singaporean Singapore", and build an ever more perfect multiracial society, even when some of our compatriots fall short, or neglect to play their part in this vital national project.

Let's see them as fellow citizens to be brought along, not adversaries to be shouted down or cancelled out.

Let us each be our brother's keeper, our sister's keeper. And let us move forward with a spirit of mutual respect and fellowship: educating each other about what matters to us, helping each other understand our different cultures, and finding the common stake we all have in one another.

We must have the humility to acknowledge that our multiracialism is still a work in progress. The honesty to recognise that not everyone will want to move at the same pace.

And yet persevere to protect our multiracialism – cherish it, nurture it, strengthen it. Then step by step, we can approach ever more closely to our ideal: "one united people, regardless of race, language or religion".