

# Singapore should work hard to change race bias in choice of PM

Any minority who wants to be PM must be aware of realities on the ground: Wong

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A Singaporean of a minority race who wants to be prime minister should be aware of attitudes and realities on the ground – that a significant proportion of Singaporeans are more comfortable with a prime minister of their own race, said Finance Minister Lawrence Wong.

He said yesterday that such attitudes – which are reflected in surveys and cut across Singaporeans from different ethnic groups – should not be accepted.

“We should instead work very hard to change them,” he said at a forum organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).

His remarks come on the heels of racial and religious incidents in the past month that have continued to generate conversations on Singapore’s multicultural identity.

During yesterday’s dialogue, the moderator, Dr Shashi Jayakumar of RSIS, asked the minister: “Why can’t an individual from a minority race be the PM? Doesn’t this run against the grain of meritocracy, as we understand it?”

Mr Wong replied: “Anyone in Singapore who wants to be prime minister will have to connect with



Housing Board blocks in Circuit Road. The HDB’s Ethnic Integration Policy – which sets quotas for flats owned by each racial group in a block or precinct – has led to social mixing and interaction across different races over the years, Finance Minister Lawrence Wong said yesterday. ST FILE PHOTO

voters and mobilise Singaporeans, and obviously lead the party to win elections. This applies to anyone regardless of race.

“The IPS surveys do show that a significant proportion of Singaporeans are more comfortable with a prime minister of their own race. This cuts across Singaporeans across different ethnic groups. This is what the survey indicates; I wish it were not so, but the survey

results are as they are.”

In the 2016 IPS study, 98 per cent of Chinese respondents said they preferred a Chinese prime minister. Just over half would accept a Malay prime minister, while six in 10 would be fine with an Indian one.

Malay and Indian respondents were also less accepting of a prime minister of another race than of one from their own.

“A minority who wants to be

prime minister should be aware of these attitudes,” said Mr Wong. “It doesn’t mean that he, or for that matter she, can’t be a prime minister. But these are the realities on the ground.”

He added: “I certainly would look forward to the day when Singapore has a minority prime minister. I would welcome that.”

He also said that the value of race-based policies such as the Chinese,

Malay, Indian and Other (CMIO) classification model, and the Housing Board’s Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP), should be recognised.

But he noted that these were not set in stone, and the Government would continue to review them.

The former national development minister was asked if the EIP – which sets quotas for flats owned by each racial group in a block or precinct – disadvantaged minorities

by restricting who they can sell to or buy from.

Mr Wong said it was not just about the numbers, and pointed out that the EIP has led to social mixing and interaction across different races over the years. “That helps to build that sense of attachment, belonging and identity as Singaporeans,” he said.

Without the EIP, ethnic enclaves seen in cities worldwide would form, with minorities squeezed out of areas with higher prices.

He acknowledged the difficulties faced by minority owners bumping into EIP limits while trying to sell their flats, and said appeals would be managed on a case-by-case basis, with “a whole range of flexibilities” – including waiving EIP limits in exceptional circumstances.

On the CMIO model, he noted criticisms that it reinforces racial consciousness and detracts from Singapore’s “multiracial ideal”.

“Consider this: If we were to discard CMIO, does it mean that people will start forgetting about their ethnic identities or paying less attention to their ethnic identities?” he said. “If we were to ignore racial differences, does that mean that the differences do not exist? It is not so clear to me.”

Citing how double-barrelled race classifications were introduced in 2010, he said the Government would keep re-examining these policies over time.

Fine-tuning policies is one part of the joint effort needed to “double down” in addressing racism and arresting any risk of Singapore regressing as a multiracial society, he said.

“All of us want to dive deeper, to do more to understand better the reasons behind racism in Singapore,” he said. “It requires us to look at things carefully based on our context, our circumstances, our realities... and then see what areas can be improved.

“It could be policy, it could be behaviours, it could be institutions. But whatever they are, look at constantly improving and getting better. I think that must be the imperative.”

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