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It is entirely legitimate that different
groups with different lived realities will
organise themselves to promote their
own interests, as that is part of how soci-
ety becomes more open and diverse, said
Minister for Finance Lawrence Wong.

But he cautioned against taking a con-
frontational or aggressive approach that
seeks maximum entitlements and rights
vis-a-vis other groups, or tribes, saying
that such an attitude will lead to political
tribalism, in which groups close ranks
and become insular.

This has happened around the world and
will quickly erode trust among people.
Instead, it needs to be a two-way process
with both sides subscribing to norms of reciprocity and
mutual benefit, he said.

LISTENING

“If you’re all talking, pushing, no one is
listening. I think we are not having a
proper conversation,” Mr Wong said
during a dialogue at the Institute of Pol-
icy Studies and S. Rajaratnam School of
International Studies’ Conference on
Identity.

“So the calls for engagement, I think,
can work if we are committed, not just to
a process of advocacy, but also a process
of engagement, listening, compromise,
negotiation, and constantly expanding
our common space.”

In the session moderated by former
ambassador Ong Keng Yong, Mr Wong
also spoke about the Government’s
approach to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-
gender and queer (LGBTQ) issues.

Some members of the audience
pointed out that some tribes, such as
LGBTQ Singaporeans, had no leverage
and could not engage on an equal footing
with others.

Acknowledging these sentiments, Mr
Wong said people have strong views on
sexual orientation and gender identity,
and this is the case all over the world.

“But I would say to LGBTQ groups
that the attitudes are not static, they are
shifting,” he added, noting that the Gov-
ernment frequently engages people,
including those from LGBTQ and reli-
gious groups.

“It’s very clear (that) sentiment and
attitudes are shifting especially among
young people, but also shifting for the
whole of society.”

This shows that conversations are not
futile, he said, adding: “It’s not as
though things will be static forever.

“As these attitudes and sentiments
shift, society will have to think about
where the balance might be. And the Gov-
ernment, too, will have to consider what
balance would be appropriate for society
and what policies we might have to
adjust.”

During the session, Mr Wong had
cited the change in rules to allow singles
to buy Housing Board flats as an example
of how policies had evolved to reflect the
stronger desire for fairness as society
matures.

He said that while policies will be
adjusted, it would not be possible to
accommodate all the requests from dif-
ferent groups and stressed that trade-
coffs would have to be made.

On its part, the Government will
strive to be a fair and honest broker in
conversations between the different
tribes, and will listen to all sides of the
debate, he pledged.

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