

Vital to strike a balance with greater contestation of ideas, says DPM Wong

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It is increasingly difficult to have policies that everyone agrees on, and trade-offs have to be made and balances struck, Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong said on Monday.

In the Singapore environment today, there is a greater contestation of ideas for every new policy and decision that is made, he said.

As leader of the fourth-generation team of the People's Action Party (PAP), Mr Wong said he has to think about what makes sense, what is right for Singapore in the long term when developing policy, and "explain, persuade, convince people that this is the right thing to do".

Mr Wong was speaking at a dia-

logue at the Reinventing Destiny conference, held at the Sands Expo and Convention Centre to mark the 100th birth anniversary of the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew.

It was organised by the Singapore University of Technology and Design's Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities, the National University of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, and Institute of Policy Studies.

The dialogue was moderated by Dr Fareed Zakaria, the host of CNN's weekly show Fareed Zakaria GPS and columnist for The Washington Post.

Mr Wong was answering a question posed by Dr Fareed about whether he is worried about Singapore having to engage in populist policies, like other countries have done.

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Govt will learn from setbacks, mistakes: DPM Wong

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Mr Wong, who is also Finance Minister, said that the pressure to do so is always there, given that information is widely available in today's world.

Dr Fareed noted that the PAP had recently faced some scandals, including one involving possible corruption.

"Do you think that you will be able to clean up the image of the PAP enough that you will, in the next election, see a return to the kind of near-total dominance?" he asked.

Mr Wong replied that PAP does not have near-total dominance.

"Political contestation is increasing. That is to be expected," he said.

"At the end of the day, for me, looking at what we must do, particularly after the recent incidents and the setbacks we have suffered, it is really for us to reflect, learn, emerge and grow stronger from that experience and do everything we can to win the confidence and trust of Singaporeans."

He added that there is currently a high base of trust between the people and their elected Government.

His immediate priority is then to see how he can strengthen the reservoir of social capital and trust, and ensure that the party can con-

tinue to earn the confidence and mandate when Singapore next goes to the polls.

Mr Wong added that beyond the recent incidents, taking into account the broader experience he has had with government, he has learnt to have a "certain sense of equanimity".

"In government, when things go right, when things go well for us, when people praise us, and say, 'We are No.1, we are gold standard' – don't let that go into our heads," he said.

But at the same time, when there are challenges, setbacks and mistakes, which are bound to happen, the Government will then learn from it.

"It is in the mistakes and the failures where we find greater motivation to learn and to be better. And that is the attitude I take," he said.

Responding to questions from the audience on building and sustaining trust domestically and internationally, Mr Wong said that people know the way Singapore operates – consistent, principled and credible in its actions.

Within the country, trust is built when the Government can ensure that every citizen, regardless of background, benefits from the nation's success, and people feel they are part of shaping Singapore's future, he said.

He added that the Government is



Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong speaking at the dialogue on Monday. With him is moderator Fareed Zakaria. ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG

now also reviewing its policies to strengthen these assurances for Singaporeans, as part of the nationwide engagement exercise Forward Singapore. The exercise culminates in a report later this year.

Responding to a question from the audience on whether there should be adjustments made to improve the lives of migrant workers here, Mr Wong said the Government is continually improving

their living conditions.

These include dormitory standards, as well as supporting their mental well-being and providing spaces for recreation.

"If we look around the world at countries with large proportions of migrant workers, in fact, I think we can, in good conscience, state that in Singapore, we treat our migrant workers well, and we will continue to do better," said Mr Wong.

But Singapore does not have the

ability to integrate all of them into its society, and one has to understand the balance, he said.

A small proportion of migrant workers will come in as permanent residents, including those who become citizens. The Government must ensure they are the ones with the best chance to integrate into Singapore society, he added.

"That must be the approach. So that gating, that regulated flow will always be there, but it doesn't mean that we treat the rest of the migrant workers badly.

"On the contrary, we will do everything we can, from a government point of view, to improve their work conditions and their living conditions. And we also appeal to Singaporeans to do their part. And that is why if I were to build a dormitory next to your home, please welcome that dormitory with open arms," said Mr Wong.

US-CHINA TENSIONS

Mr Wong was asked whether China's current economic problems are a result of moving away from a more market-oriented approach to a more state-oriented one.

He noted that China faces a challenge in the property sector – a very important part of its economy – as it has a supply overhang issue, and excess leverage in some large property firms.

China's domestic demand has also been weak, and with the measures that the West and the United States have imposed on it, its ex-

port sector trade has also decreased.

"So, they have to find some way to stimulate demand. The government, I am sure, is aware of this. There are very competent technocrats in government, they know what to do. But to get consumption going again requires not just short-term measures," said Mr Wong.

"It also requires longer-term structural solutions to strengthen their social safety net."

He noted that the new defining feature of the US-China relationship is no longer one of engagement, but extreme strategic competition.

The worry about this dynamic is the potential for retaliation that can result in huge costs for both countries, and "a lot of trouble for the rest of us in the world", said Mr Wong.

On concerns that measures imposed by the US and the West will slow down China in terms of accessing cutting-edge technology, Mr Wong said this would not keep China down.

"Because (the Chinese) are determined for what they see as... China's time in the world. And China wants to take its rightful place in the world as a modern, great nation," he said.

"And so there is a tremendous drive and determination not just at the government leadership level, but also amongst the private businesses... to move forward."

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