

Foster deeper understanding and acceptance amid changes: Minister

It will help ensure that changes can strengthen social fabric: Edwin Tong

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It may not always be possible to find common ground as Singapore's society changes, said Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Edwin Tong.

"But the goal should always be to foster deeper understanding and acceptance, and mediate a position that is acceptable to most," he noted. "This will help ensure that changes can strengthen rather than fray our social fabric."

On major policy matters – especially if they affect social cohesion – the Government will take a "thoughtful, consultative and incremental" approach, Mr Tong added.

The minister was speaking at the Institute of Policy Studies' annual Singapore Perspectives conference, themed "Community", which took place on Jan 20 at the Sands Expo and Convention Centre.

In his remarks before taking questions from the audience, Mr Tong spoke of how Singapore has managed to develop a strong identity despite its diversity – an exceptional outcome that should be celebrated in 2025 as the nation marks 60 years of independence.

To remain exceptional, Singapore will have to build a strong social compact that holds people together, even as it makes space for different views, he said.

"We enable the space for diverse cultures to flourish, but develop a strong sense of 'we first' as a nation," said Mr Tong, who is also Second Minister for Law.

One element of this involves strengthening common values and principles, such as multiculturalism, and racial and religious harmony.

And to build up its common space, Singapore must be even more intentional in encouraging



Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Edwin Tong answering questions from the audience during a dialogue moderated by SMU president Lily Kong at the Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspectives conference on Jan 20. The conference centred on the theme of community. ST PHOTO: BRIAN TEO

and promoting social mixing and mutual appreciation, the minister said.

He noted that global trends towards deglobalisation and nativism may strain social cohesion in Singapore.

"Singapore faces a pivotal choice – commit to openness and diversity, or risk losing the essence of what makes it exceptional," he said. "Our survival and prosperity hinge on remaining open to the world, connected through networks and embracing diversity."

Challenges also arise from within. In 2023, Singapore's total fertility rate fell below 1.

The country is also "super-ageing", with one in four Singaporeans aged 65 or older by 2030, when the senior support ratio is expected to

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fall to 2.1 working adults.

Singapore will have no choice but to balance immigration against demographics to sustain its economy, Mr Tong said. At the same time, it will have to deepen efforts to strengthen bonds between all who call the country home.

Mr Tong added that "thoughtful and deliberate" integration efforts are needed to manage concerns that could deepen societal divides, such as concerns over jobs, crowded living spaces, the erosion of national identity, and the formation of foreign enclaves.

Asked if the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others ethnic classification needs to be reviewed, given that social and ethnic diversities in Singapore have become more complex, Mr Tong said the model is

still valuable today.

He cited the example of the Ethnic Integration Policy in housing, where race-based quotas promote social mixing.

But in the case of mixed marriages, he said he understands that it does not do justice for a person to be pigeonholed into a certain category.

"As to whether we should constantly be reviewing it and thinking about it, I think the answer is yes. The answer has to be yes, because it's something that is increasingly prevalent today," he said.

"But for the moment, I am not sure there is a better way to achieve the more important outcome, which is intentional social mixing."

Mr Tong was also asked if there is space to incorporate religious studies in the school curriculum to nurture a common understanding of different religions.

It is important to learn about other religions, but this has to be done cautiously as religion is deeply personal, emotive and open to interpretation, he replied.

Beyond demographic shifts, Mr Tong noted in his speech that Singapore has also become more diverse in terms of perspectives, views and aspirations.

Technology can accelerate the fragmentation of society as people gravitate towards interacting only with those who share similar views online.

The minister pointed out that social media feeds have become potent tools for shaping opinions and mobilising action.

For instance, the Israel-Hamas conflict has deeply moved many Singaporeans despite being so far away, he said.

As Singapore celebrates SG60 in 2025, it must continue to forge a stronger confidence in its sense of "us" as a nation, with a deeper appreciation of its history and cultural heritage, Mr Tong said.

"I believe that our ability to forge a stronger, collective 'we', as opposed to 'me', while enabling and even encouraging diversities to come forward, sharing perspectives and having collective aspirations, will give us the space to flourish," he said.

Part of this involves engaging with everyone to build the nation up, Mr Tong noted.

He added: "A vibrant and cohesive society requires partnership between the public, private and people sectors. And, so, the Government is working to create an environment where Singaporeans and communities are empowered, and hopefully even inspired, to step up."

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