

KENT RIDGE MINISTERIAL FORUM

The challenges ahead

MM Lee tackles questions about Singapore's future

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SINGAPORE — When he speaks to young Singaporeans, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew often reminds them of Singapore's history.

Yesterday, he looked at Singapore's future and shared his thoughts with more than 1,200 students on the challenges facing this nation over the next 50 years.

For an hour, he tackled nine questions posed by local university students at the National University of Singapore Kent Ridge Ministerial Forum, ranging from issues of identity to conserving the environment.

One area Mr Lee said he worries about is the dilution of the Singaporean identity, as more immigrants enter the country.

In 50 years' time, he said, "born and bred Singaporeans will be from fathers and mothers who are not born and bred here". So, to help integrate new citizens, the Government "disperses" them around Singapore so they will not form "little China" or other cliques, said Mr Lee.

When asked if he had concerns that Singapore, having started out as

a more egalitarian society, is beginning to be "divided by social classes", Mr Lee said it is an "inevitable process" for a maturing society.

In China, the communists started with a classless society, he said, but today, it has a well-connected class, who hold jobs such as bankers or real estate developers.

While entirely capable in their jobs, they would probably never have been recognised — among China's huge population — if not for their connections, he said.

Using examples from China — a country he frequently brought up yesterday evening — Mr Lee said two areas China would take longer to compete in with Singapore would be in intellectual property regulations and the rule of law.

China's lack of copyright protection is why companies choose to conduct their research here, he said.

Would environmental consciousness be a "new ambition" for Singapore, asked a first-year Singapore Management University student. Mr Lee said Singapore would always be learning from Japan — a country he noted for its cohesive focus in achieving such goals. Still, there has been careful thought put into encouraging more recycling here.

But to upgrade HDB flats so that they have chutes that sort out

recyclable materials would involve high costs, and there is no way to enforce proper usage in a block with many flats, he said. Only now do some upcoming HDB projects incorporate such recycling chutes.

Focusing on the bigger picture, Mr Lee also spoke about the climate change talks in December in Copenhagen, where Singapore, which has one of the highest carbon emissions per capita in the world, will go prepared with her arguments against having to make a firm commitment to lower her emissions, and hence, her growth.

"It's unfair," said Mr Lee. The bulk of emissions are caused by manufacturing goods for export — and which are consumed elsewhere.

But even as Mr Lee spoke on the future of the Republic, in true characteristic, he stressed that young Singaporeans must not forget the lessons and hardship of their forefathers.

"Can we get the successive generations to understand that we built this edifice, that this is a 100-storey building built on an extremely narrow foundation, but piled deep and structured in such a way that the winds won't blow it down. To do that, you'll need a people with a drive and leadership that anticipates the future," he said.