THE VOICES THAT ALSO MATTER

Peace and prosperity is no excuse for social apathy, argue participants at forum

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WITH the economy on a roll, one wonders: Have comfortable Singaporeans become blind to the inequities around them?

At a student forum on Friday that posed this question, Mrs Bridget Lew, founder-president of Home (Humanitarian organisation for Migration Economics), a migrant worker help group, clearly felt this was the case to some extent.

"It was outrageous" the way some Singaporeans treated their foreign domestic workers—the "small people in society", she said.

Others in the 100-strong audience called for more resources to be given to help the disabled community—something that popular blogger Lee Kin Mun, better known as mrbrown, agreed with.

A father of a nine-year-old autistic daughter, he wondered why "a lot of resources" have been given to help gifted students who "don't really need as much help as those who cannot even function as a normal human being".

He also urged individuals to speak up for what they care about, instead of relying on others to do so.

Mr Lee said that when his newspaper column was stopped last year, people had emailed him lamenting the loss of his voice to highlight their views.

"It was weird because I wanted to tell them: I'm not your voice," said Mr Lee. "You are responsible for speaking up for things that you care about. If (what I say) happens to jive with what you care about, then great. But we cannot rely on one person, one mrbrown or one politician, to speak up for you," he added.

The role of alternative voices was a talking point during the Singapore Management University (SMU) forum on whether peace blinds Singapore to social injustices.

Student participant Liang Ye felt that certain issues are not brought up when things get comfortable.

"Apathy can also be peaceful. When you don't seem to see anything happening, you think that everything is ok. When nobody voices an issue most people are aware of, then it seems that things are peaceful," the 22-year-old told TODAY.

This was a point that Non-Constituency MP Sylvia Lim also raised, when she quoted former Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan's observations.

In his memoirs, he had said the widening gap between the rich and poor in the United States could unravel the ties binding society, and ultimately result in violence.

Ms Lim said the threat could "come from within if there are too many inequities and unfairness that leads society to such actions."

Asked about alternative voices, she said the authorities "do listen very carefully to the things we have to say".

"Maybe it's mostly to rebut our points. But it doesn't mean that they don't take the point seriously. Maybe they use it in their ongoing reviews of the policies."

"Over the years, we've noticed that certain changes in Government policies, perhaps, were raised by some Opposition parties earlier," she added.

She further argued, it was important for the public to "hear the alternative voices" and judge for themselves which view made more sense.

While pointing out that there will "always be social injustice", the SMU's assistant professor of Law Eugene Tan, the forum moderator, said "each of us can do our little bit" and draw attention to concerns that may be under-represented.