

PM: Crucial to help S'poreans cope amid many changes

He points to new challenges posed by the speed of changes

By CHARISSA YONG

AMID significant changes affecting the region and Singapore, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said last night that it was important to help Singaporeans cope with new challenges they face, some of which they may find discomforting given the fast pace at which these are happening.

In remarks which took account of new economic realities and social shifts at home as well as developments abroad, including the election of new political leaders, he said: "It's a time of change, and we have to get used to it."

Singaporeans today face changes arising from ongoing economic restructuring, the presence of new immigrants and foreigners, and a faster flow of information on the Internet and social media, he said during an hour-long question and answer session.

The Government can help com-

panies through measures such as training and promoting ongoing learning, or obtaining equipment.

"We have to enable them to compete, make sure there's a fair playing field... to make sure we don't get held back and prevented from getting to a better place because it's too painful for the incumbents," he said at the dinner of the Indian Institutes of Management (IIM) alumni conference.

Over 1,000 alumni from the IIM network of publicly-run, prestigious business schools in India are here as leaders in multinational and major Indian companies.

Responding to a question on how to maintain harmony between different cultures here, he said it was crucial to manage the speed at which newcomers were brought in, as well as the mix of where they come from.

But "both sides have to make the effort", he added. "Those who come have to make the effort to

fit in and participate in society. And Singaporeans have to understand that these are new arrivals and we must help them fit in."

Asked if last December's Little India riot changed Singaporeans' and the Government's perception of Indians, he said it had not. The incident was unfortunate. It was investigated, the causes established and follow-up action taken.

"The workers are here for a purpose, we need them. They are building houses for us, they are building trains for us, they are working all over - in banks, in so many companies. I think we have to manage the non-indigenous population in a way that we can bear over the long term, and the Little India riot notwithstanding,

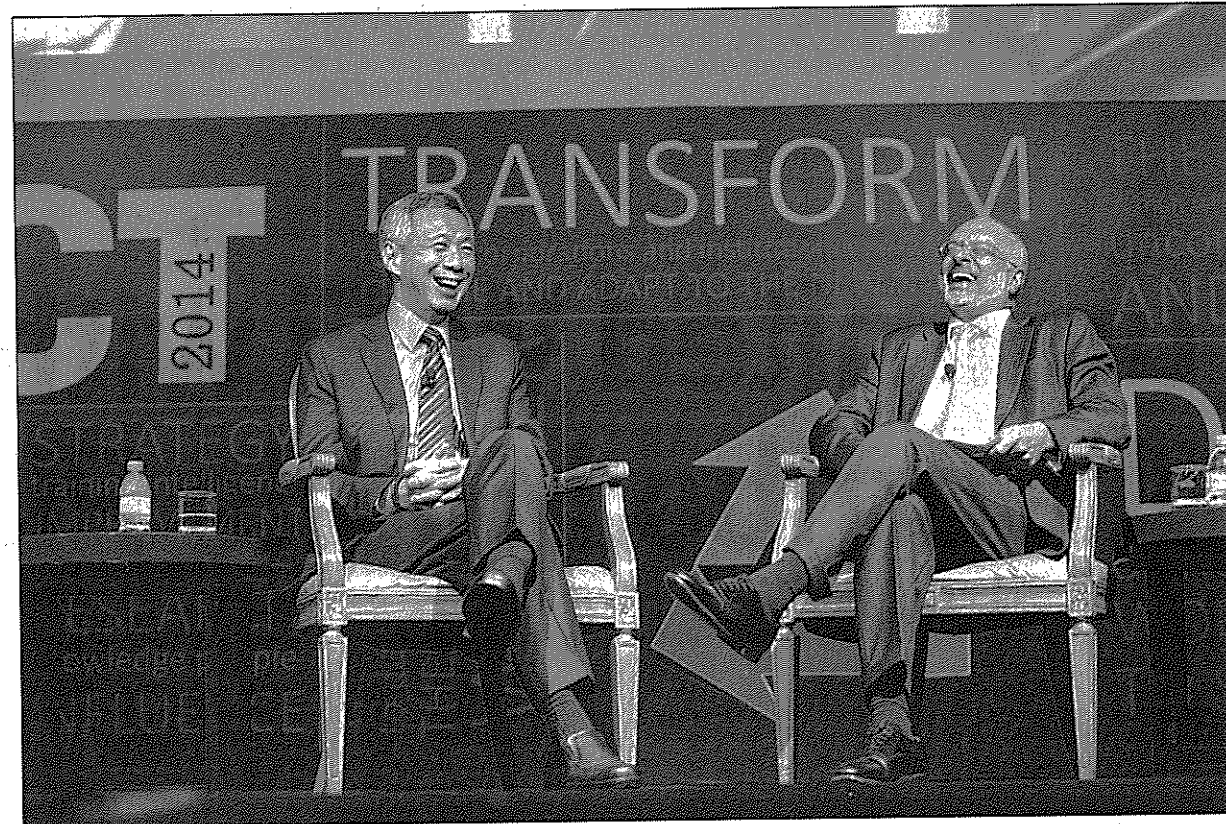
we have to continue to do that."

Just as how the riot did not change how Singaporeans viewed foreign workers, the workers themselves "continue to be quite comfortable living and working here, and certainly, many more are wanting to come. That's why we have to manage the numbers."

As for the impact of social media, he said that how information was disseminated quickly online could cause knee-jerk reactions.

"In Singapore sometimes, when someone says something outrageous, the next day everybody knows and expresses great outrage... Yes, it was outrageous, but do we need to get worked up every time that happens?"

Singapore must learn to navi-



PM Lee sharing a light moment with DBS chief executive Piyush Gupta while taking questions at a session moderated by the latter on the first day of the two-day Indian Institutes of Management alumni conference. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

ON GOVERNING IN THE INTERNET AGE

"Knowledge is not free; yes, it's more readily available, but so is disinformation and so is misinformation, so is misunderstanding. And if you looked at what has happened worldwide, the Internet has not caused a great convergence on universal truth. Far from it.

It has led to divisions and all kinds of different ideas being able to take root and germinate, which are completely contradictory to one another, and groups which are completely antithetic to each other. And we have to make sure that we don't get seduced by the delusion that - we know everything, that what we know is the truth, and we are the sole possessors, and therefore, we will fight it out to the end. Because that way, you will fracture the society and be less able to form a consensus and move forward together.

My personal view is that human society was not designed with the Internet age in mind, in the sense that the way it has always worked - you have lags, information disseminates over a period of time, you have time to think it over, (let it) sink in, discuss it, and gradually form what we hope is a wise consensus. But today, all of that is telescoped and the splash goes out tonight, and tomorrow morning, everybody knows the answer, which may be the wrong answer. In fact, far from having a faster circuit, you have a short circuit collectively, and that is a real problem which I don't think people have found solutions to."

- PM Lee

gate such bumps, which "narrow the margin of stability", he said.

On the region, he said Singapore looked forward to working with new Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Indonesia's incoming president Joko Widodo.

About Mr Joko, he said: "I think (he has) a strong psychological mandate from his people... I'm happy that the electoral processes are practically completed."

He also encouraged India to play a bigger regional role by joining more free trade agreements: "We'd like to see that India is able to spare the bandwidth and focus to extend their reach, influence and engage with the region and benefit from it."

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