

Double standards towards foreigners worry PM

Bad behaviour by foreigners creates storm but good deeds go unnoticed

By RACHEL CHANG

PRIME Minister Lee Hsien Loong expressed worry last night about the double standards being shown towards foreigners in Singapore.

When a foreigner says or does something wrong, especially to a Singaporean, the response is vitriolic and overwhelming.

But bad Singaporean behaviour often goes uncriticised, and a good deed by a foreigner often unnoticed, he pointed out.

Delivering his National Day Rally speech at the University Cultural Centre, Mr Lee said it is "fair enough" to oppose the Government's immigration policies. But a knee-jerk, one-sided response to cases of foreigner misconduct "reflects badly on us".

Coverage in the international media of xenophobia here, like a New York Times article last month headlined "In Singapore, Vitriol Against Chinese Newcomers", damages Singapore's global reputation, he said.

More fundamentally, such coverage "speaks poorly of the sort of people we are".

Mr Lee cited the example of Chinese undergraduate Sun Xu's derogatory posts about Singaporeans, posted on his microblog in February, which set off an online storm.

Mr Sun, 25, a National University of Singapore student, was "roundly and rightly chastised by Singaporeans", he said.

There are, however, many nasty posts by Singaporeans about foreigners, even websites devoted to "tormenting and berating" certain groups of foreigners - "but very few people stand up to say this is wrong, shameful, we repudiate that. I think that is no

good", he lamented.

Mr Lee also rued the way instances of exemplary behaviour by foreigners in Singapore are ignored, while those of bad behaviour go immediately viral.

He cited a Straits Times forum letter last month about a foreign nurse on a bus being the only one to help a sick old woman, while the other passengers ignored her.

No one whipped out their smartphones to film this incident, nor was there any Internet response to the letter, he noted.

Incidents of misbehaving foreigners are inevitable, but "ditto Singaporeans", he said.

Smartphones and social media have made it easier for people to offend and take offence, but in an impassioned voice, he asked: "What sort of people do we want to be?"

"We need to be people who are proud of ourselves, who have a heart, who can feel for our fellow human beings, who will be courteous, respectful and behave with others as we would like others to behave towards us.

"It's not my job to give a lecture or a sermon," Mr Lee concluded solemnly. "This is a speech. But I have to point this out. This is my duty.

"It's ultimately up to us how big-hearted we want to be. We may be a small island, (but) we cannot be small-minded."

Success stories in integration do exist, he noted, such as newcomers from China serving as grassroots leaders, or a German permanent resident who shops at Tekka Market, makes his own sambal and loves durians.

Ms Le Ha Thanh Mai, a Vietnamese student at Singapore Management University, was described by Mr Lee as so localised



'SMALL ISLAND, BUT NOT SMALL-MINDED': People at the Esplanade waterfront catching the action at this year's National Day Parade. PM Lee rued how instances of exemplary behaviour by foreigners here are ignored, while those of bad behaviour go viral. PHOTO: MARK CHEONG FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

"It reflects badly on us. It damages our international reputation. People think that Singapore is anti-foreigner and xenophobic... It speaks poorly of what sort of people we are."

- PM Lee, expressing concern over the rising anger seen against foreigners

that no one could tell she was a foreigner except for her name.

Later, the 21-year-old, who has been studying here since she was 15, told The Straits Times:

"I'm grateful to be here, and really hope I can be a good example for Singaporeans to see that there are many foreigners here who are contributing back."

Tampines GRC MP Baey Yam Keng said it was brave of PM Lee not to mince his words on the topic. "You could sense his disappointment. It could just be a small

segment of Singaporeans propagating this stuff, but it spreads and makes people think that this is a true reflection of Singapore." rchang@sph.com.sg