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PM TOUCHES ON DOMESTIC CHALLENGES LIKE PRODUCTIVITY

TPP pact among global issues raised at SMU dialogue

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SINGAPORE – Questions on developments around the world dominated a dialogue Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had with students yesterday, even though his speech was largely centred on the country's domestic challenges in the years ahead.

Over an hour, seven of the 12 questions raised by members of the 3,500-strong audience at the Ho Rih Hwa lecture organised by the Singapore Management University (SMU) were on external issues. These ranged from the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement (TPP) to territorial disputes in the South China Sea and the United States Supreme Court's ruling on Friday to legalise same-sex marriage in the country.

An SMU final-year economics student asked Mr Lee whether a political or judicial solution would bet-

ter address a "thorny issue" such as same-sex marriage.

Responding, the Prime Minister said the legislative would have to act very cautiously in Singapore because of strong views in society.

"You can pass the law, but will it be accepted? Will it be respected? Will people feel that it is legitimate?" he asked. "This is the way the American system works. They have created the Supreme Court and it is nine persons, and the nine persons decide important issues. In this case, it was five to four, so actually one person decided the issue."

It is important to have a good sense of the values and attitudes of the population rather than "try to impose your own on them", Mr Lee stressed, reiterating that this is an issue to be decided "collectively, rather than (by) the Government".

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PHOTO: WEE TECK HIAN

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PM Lee Hsien Loong
WITH SMU CHAIRMAN HO KWON PING AT THE DIALOGUE YESTERDAY

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Touching on the productivity drive in Singapore, a Secondary 4 student from River Valley High School raised the possibility of Singapore facing the same problem as the US, where increased productivity does not translate to higher wages.

However, Mr Lee said the reasons for this were unclear and could range from declining union power to profiteering bosses or the rapid growth of the finance industry in America.

While a similar situation may happen in Singapore, Mr Lee pointed out that wages here had consistently risen, even faster than productivity in the past decade. "I would say (if) productivity (goes) up, wages may not. (If) productivity doesn't go up, wages

will not," he added.

The Prime Minister also explained Singapore's interests in parts of the TPP, where the US had pushed for nations to limit support for state-owned enterprises (SOEs).

While he acknowledged that Singapore has to give fair treatment to its SOEs, "we also want our companies to get fair treatment when they go to other countries and to get fair competition compared to SOEs in those countries", he said.

Mr Lee added that SOEs in Singapore are managed by "proper boards", without special perks or duties. "Everybody knows Singapore's GLCs (government-linked corporations) are different from SOEs elsewhere," he said.

Domestic issues raised during the dialogue included the challenges in balancing career and family aspirations, and the problem of competitiveness in Singapore.

Mr Lee noted that perspectives on how to prioritise children and one's career would shift — those looking ahead in the longer term might prioritise family over work. "It's very difficult to ask a 20-year-old to imagine what a 70-year-old would like to feel (at the end of the day)," he said.

On competitiveness, Mr Lee said some are more anxious "than they need to be" and that there would be many opportunities in life. To be competitive globally, Singaporeans need to be able to reorientate their directions and adapt, he added.