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Making Singapore more inclusive for all

NMP Yip Pin Xiu's speech underscores need to continue building on efforts to support all



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The theme of inclusivity re-emerged on the ninth and final day of the marathon Budget debate, when Nominated MP Yip Pin Xiu called for athletes with disabilities to be recognised by national sports associations (NSAs).

In her maiden speech since becoming an NMP last September, the Paralympian swimmer acknowledged how Singapore has become more supportive of disabled athletes over the years.

Yet, Ms Yip – who has won three Paralympic golds and one silver, among many other medals – said she is not recognised as an athlete with the Singapore Swimming Association, the sport's national governing body.

Instead, all athletes with disabilities, regardless of their sport, continue to be represented by the Singapore Disability Sports Council.

"By representing all athletes with disabilities through the Singapore Disability Sports Council instead of the sports they play, are we not putting the disability before the ability?" Ms Yip asked, as she shared her dream of sports as a united front for Singaporeans, not separated into disability or able-bodied sports.

With both able-bodied athletes and those with disabilities inspiring the nation through their results in the past years, it is timely to forge an environment that

complements other efforts at inclusion, she said.

"If an NSA is ready to make such a change, let's have our system ready to support it. If an NSA is not ready, then let's see how we can build an environment to better that probability," she added.

Her speech had MPs thumping their armrests in approval.

Replying, Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Culture, Community and Youth Baey Yam Keng said this was a decision for the sports fraternities and NSAs, which are independent bodies, to make.

He noted that the local NSAs for cycling, equestrian and sailing oversee athletes of all abilities, with table tennis set to join their ranks.

While saying that his ministry would want to see more NSAs adopting an inclusive approach in developing national athletes, Mr Baey pointed to concerns that doing so could dilute the attention on para sports.

Ms Denise Phua (Jalan Besar GRC) subsequently said the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) gives funding to

Sport Singapore, which in turn funds the various national sports associations.

"Why can't MCCY request these agencies to be more inclusive in their visioning?" Ms Phua asked.

Culture, Community and Youth Minister Grace Fu responded this time, saying such a change may not be in the best interests of athletes with disabilities if the NSAs are not ready, and lack the requisite training facilities or coaches.

Urging patience, she said: "Let us move at a pace and a direction that's acceptable to all stakeholders."

Certainly, such a move would neither be easy nor is it something that can take place overnight.

But as Singapore continues on its journey to becoming a more inclusive society, Ms Yip's suggestion is one worth considering, and following up on.

Over the course of the past two weeks, MPs raised the theme of inclusivity on multiple occasions.

Ms Phua noted during the debate on the Manpower Ministry's budget that only an estimated five in 100 people with disabilities were

officially working in Singapore as of 2017 – one of the lowest in developed nations.

She and Dr Intan Azura Mokhtar (Ang Mo Kio GRC) asked for more to be done to help people with special needs join the workforce.

From the responses by various office-holders over the past two weeks, it is apparent that more attention is being placed not only on those with special needs, but the broader group of people who are disadvantaged.

Minister of State for Manpower Zaqy Mohamad said the authorities will scale up efforts to get more employers ready to hire and manage people with special needs.

Minister of State for Social and Family Development Sam Tan announced that two new work groups will be set up to help people with special needs live independently and improve their chances of getting a job.

The effort is extended to cover those disadvantaged in other areas as well. The Ministry of National Development (MND) will also roll out measures to help families in

rental homes own homes.

These measures include extending a \$15,000 grant to second-timer families in rental homes to buy three-room flats in new estates, and setting up a team that will actively spot and help rental families with the potential to buy a Housing Board flat.

The MND will also work in concert with three other ministries to tackle the hot-button issues of inequality and social mobility.

In his Budget speech, Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat said spending by social ministries have doubled from \$15 billion in the 2009 financial year to \$30 billion last year.

The social measures in this year's Budget, he added, are part of the long-term plan to build a caring and inclusive society.

There is no doubt Singapore has made significant strides in supporting all its people. But as yesterday's debate showed, the work to make society even more inclusive must go on.

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