The responsibility imposed by free speech

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THE rules of engagement governing Singapore public debate are in a state of flux. Previously, Singaporeans were admonished to address political leaders deferentially (its antithesis, being boh tua boh say, was frowned upon), told to enter politics if they wanted to talk politics, and to observe “OB markers” by avoiding “taboo” topics.

Today, Singaporeans are encouraged to be stakeholders and to be passionately committed to Singapore as our home, and not a mere hotel.

This call to take part in public issues is a needed antidote to redress the passive bystander syndrome fostered by top-down governance.

Where politically contentious topics like the casino debate are concerned, it was unsurprising (and heartening) to witness disagreement within the Cabinet, Parliament and among citizens. This shows that dissent is not necessarily subversive and may indicate deep, thoughtful concern.

Sceptics may consider the consultation process cosmetic, but this is better than not being consulted at all. The Government still governs and charts the course of national development, for better or worse; within democratic systems, a government not responsive to the citizenry ultimately is held accountable at the ballot box.

Of course, limits to free speech remain, such as laws prohibiting defamatory or obscene speech. If the trend towards more sustained consultation in policy-making continues, we should celebrate the virtues of free debate while being conscious of its potential abuses.

Hearing opinions

FREE speech is democracy’s lifeblood and a constitutional right, enabling both the citizen and policymaker to hear a range of perspectives necessary to reach informed conclu- sions through accurate, representative feedback. Providing channels for hearing competing views serves the process value of inclusive participation, which facilitates forging sound substantive decisions.

As public policies entail adopting a moral or ideological stance to the exclusion of others, there is no “neutral” perspective on public issues. Indeed, not taking a view is to take a view.

Ultimately, our concern lies not only with the liberty of speaking but in evaluating the wisdom or deficiency of articulated views.

Where disagreement exists, the Constitution appoints the people’s elected representatives in Parliament, who embody the majority will, as the arbiter on public issues disputes. The majority will is not the final word on wisdom or truth, but generally governs the workings of democracy. Not everyone will be pleased with the final decision, but within a democracy, there exists the hope of persuading the decision-makers on the merits of a viewpoint. In the absence of channels for articulating grievances, an alienated citizenry, or worse, revolution, may result.

There exist certain threats to this process. Firstly, attempts to exclude certain voices from public debate, as where strict secularists seek to exclude religious perspectives on policy issues and mischaracterise the issue as an imposition of religious views. This is disingenuous, undemocratic and unwarranted censorship motivated by the desire to pre-emptively gag views the censor does not like.

An old Talmudic proverb advises: “Examine the contents, not the label.” The intrinsic worth of any view, whether motivated by “secular” or “religious” convictions, must be scrutinised to see if it buttresses or undermines the common good.

The test of any worldview or philosophy rests on its logical consistency, empirical adequacy and experiential relevance. A religiously motivated view must be presented in terms accessible to public reason in order to have persuasive weight, but certainly, a citizen’s conscience or reason-based viewpoint must be heard and evaluated.

For example, religious groups may support strong family values, and that is neither obscure nor exclusive to people with such affiliations.

Secondly, complex public issues when addressed through sound bites will oversimplify matters and obscure what is truly at stake. For example, when speaking of “gay rights” it is important to identify precisely what is being argued for, as a whole range of issues is implicated.

Focus on nuances

THERE is a vast difference between affirming equal rights of employment for all, and mandating that marriage be redefined to include same-sex unions.

Rhetoric must not be used to thwart reasoned consideration. It is unhelpful to assert that something is “natural” or “progressive” because “progress is a comparative of which we have not settled the superlative”, as G. K. Chesterton noted. We cannot know what is progressive or regressive until we first identify the northern star of what is normative or desirable. Implicit assumptions of what is good or right should be made explicit in public debate, so the public may judge the worthiness of a particular goal.

Lastly, genuine debate must avoid the cheap strategy of imposing labels on persons with a view to demonising or discrediting their views—“he’s a conservative/liberal or religious/secularist and therefore his views should be dismissed.” Labels are hardly illuminating as a person can hold a range of views on different matters.

In public debate, the focus should be on the nuances of an issue. Attempts to gloss over the substance of a view are evident where pejorative terms like “archaic” or “antiquated” are hurled, which manifests chronological snobbery rather than careful analysis.

Free speech is a right, but it comes with unwritten responsibilities; we police ourselves in speaking by a sense of temperance and fairness, to preserve civil debate and reject shouting matches.

Where self-restraint is lacking and free speech is abused, for example, by crying “Fire!” in a crowded theatre, the law steps in to limit our freedom.

While the Government has the duty to respect the citizen’s right to free speech, the citizen is duty-bound to exercise this responsibly and should engage in public policy matters which affect our lives.

The media is duty-bound, given its role in information dissemination, to ensure all perspectives, even those that journalists and editors may personally dislike, are fully and freely aired. These conditions are the pre-requisites for the conduct of authentic debate and strengthening of democracy in Singapore.

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