

## Statement on SJI Vice Principal's Comments on Activism in Singapore

As a community of students concerned with political literacy and civic engagement, CAPE is disappointed with the comments made by the Vice Principal (VP) of Saint Joseph's Institution (SJI) Mr Leonard Tan on the role and relevance of activism. Mr Tan had made those comments to explain SJI's rescinding of its invitation to Ms Rachel Yeo, Director of Research & Advocacy at the Inter-University LGBT Network, to speak at TEDxYouth@SJI.

In his address to SJI students, Mr Tan made three key points:

1. Ms Yeo was disinvited because she was “an advocate for the LGBT issue”. He explained: “[A]ny form of activism is socially divisive. It divides society, it divides a community and.. it goes against the very grain of what we stand for. We are community builders.”
2. On community-building, Mr Tan gave the example of how St John Baptist De Laselle “impacted change from within by directly affecting the person beside him”, and contrasted this with activism. He elaborated: “If I want to make a change, I’ll get into a position where I can make change peacefully, cohesively, coherently.”
3. Despite disavowing activism, Mr Tan then called on his students to “stand for what we believe in”. Specifically, he explained that “as a Catholic school... we have our own beliefs and values that are centred on the teachings of Christ and the gospel. We have our own set of values. We also advocate our own set of values.”

### 1. Activism is not socially divisive -- it exposes social divisions

Firstly, Mr Tan’s characterisation of activism as “socially divisive” is unfortunate and misinformed. Activism is not in and of itself divisive; instead, it exposes and reveals the inequalities and injustices that lurk beneath the facade of stability and harmony. For instance, it would seem ridiculous to accuse civil rights activists such as Baptist minister Martin Luther King Jr. in the United States and Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa of causing social division for advocating racial equality and anti-discrimination. Short of being the cause of social division, a lack of activism merely masks such fissures, leaving marginalised groups to suffer in silence.

Similarly, in the local context, female activists such as Mdm Chan Choy Siong of the the People’s Action Party and Mdm Khatijun Nissa Siraj of the Young Women's Muslim Association (PPIS) were responsible for the enactment of the Women’s Charter in 1961, which promoted gender equality and ended polygamy in Singapore. Without the commitment and contributions of such activists, women in Singapore may not enjoy the gender equality that we celebrate today.

## 2. Activism also fosters community-building

Activism is also not opposed to community-building. On the contrary, activism can help to build and strengthen communities, particularly those from minority or marginalised backgrounds. Community organising is also a key aspect of activism and requires individuals from different walks of life to come together in support of a particular cause. This sense of solidarity is not unlike what Mr Tan believes Saint John La Salle achieved.

An example is how migrant workers' advocacy organisations such as the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME) and Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) have successfully brought Singaporeans and migrant workers together to build a more just and inclusive society.

## 3. Singapore's guiding principle of secularism

Finally, despite urging his students to “form your own opinion with all the information you can get”, it is ironic that Mr Tan decided instead to prevent his students a learning opportunity on the basis that Ms Yeo's views are different from those that the institution holds. This may set a dangerous precedent that blunts the principle of secularism in our schools. While a school may hold particular institutional beliefs, it should also respect the right of students to access knowledge from different sources and perspectives, freely hold their own beliefs and engage in constructive dialogue with those who hold differing opinions in the pursuit of truth and understanding.

Moreover, Mr Tan's comments on SJI having its own set of values as a Catholic school appear to run contrary to the Principles of Lasallian Education, which declare SJI as an “inclusive school [that] do not require non-Catholic teachers and students to... hold Catholic beliefs”,

As students and members of the future generation of Singapore, we are concerned by how school administrators are depriving the young people of Singapore of opportunities to have honest and constructive conversations on important social issues. Mr Tan may be doing students from SJI and other schools a huge disservice with his careless, perplexing comments. We call on the Ministry of Education and the SJI Board of Governors to review and address the underlying causes that resulted in this unfortunate controversy, and to take steps to prevent similar incidents from occurring in the future.

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### **About CAPE**

CAPE, which stands for Community for Advocacy & Political Education, is a student organisation founded by students from Yale-NUS College and NUS Law. We aim to increase political literacy among young Singaporeans to make civil participation more accessible.

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