Excuse me, are you an 'elite'?

BY **THE EDGE SINGAPORE**

When did conversations about the so-called elite class and elitist attitudes in Singapore first surface? Some have argued that it was as far back as in the 1880s, when the British colonialists created the Higher Scholarships in Singapore. A special course was developed for the students at a school that would become Raffles Institution. According to a *Mothership* article in June, the grant — which later became the Queen's Scholarship, and then evolved into the current President's Scholarship — sparked criticisms of how it fostered unhealthy competition among students and parents, and concentrated a disproportionate amount of resources on a select group of students.

Then there was the hullabaloo in 2006, when the teenage daughter of a Member of Parliament had commented rather uncharitably on her blog about the problems of job security and age discrimination that another much older blogger had raised. The girl, who at the time was a scholarship student at Raffles Junior College, had written "get out of my elite, uncaring face" — a phrase that possibly earned her lifelong notoriety.

Earlier this year, Raffles Institution came out to dispute its label as an "elite school" following concerns that the school had become "insular" and "less diverse", according to the school's former principal Chan Poh Meng and Singapore Education Minister Ong Ye Kung, respectively. Taking issue with the term "elite", current principal Frederick Yeo told *TODAY* newspaper in an interview that, "once you use the word elite, you divide, you separate, you segregate".

Most recently, the issue of an elite class and the elitist attitudes, or elitism, that they may display resurfaced at the Institute of Policy Studies' 30th anniversary event. Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing brought up his encounter with a few students from Anglo-Chinese School (Independent), who said they were upset about being labelled "elitist" by others simply for being enrolled in the school.

Chan used the example to call for a distinction between elites and those with elitist attitudes. "To be successful and rise up is not elitism. To be successful and not reach out is elitism," he said.

Chan's definitions are only the latest in the debate on elites and elitism, which has been heating up in the last two years. "The one issue that has dominated any discussion on public policy or society or politics has been inequality," says Adrian Kuah, senior research fellow at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP). "When you talk about inequality, it invariably brings into the conversation related issues such as meritocracy, poverty, social mobility and of course this whole debate on elites and elitism.

"Previously, it was something that you were either tolerant of, indifferent towards or maybe even resigned to. But today it's become a trigger for anger, resentment, frustration, and I think it's interesting to explore why that's the case."

Elitism, not elite, is the problem

To be sure, elites exist in every society; there are the intellectual elites, political elites and socio-economic elites. "In Singapore, there are various types of elites, but because we are a meritocracy that is defined by academic abilities, the elites tend to be those who, by virtue of their cognitive abiliti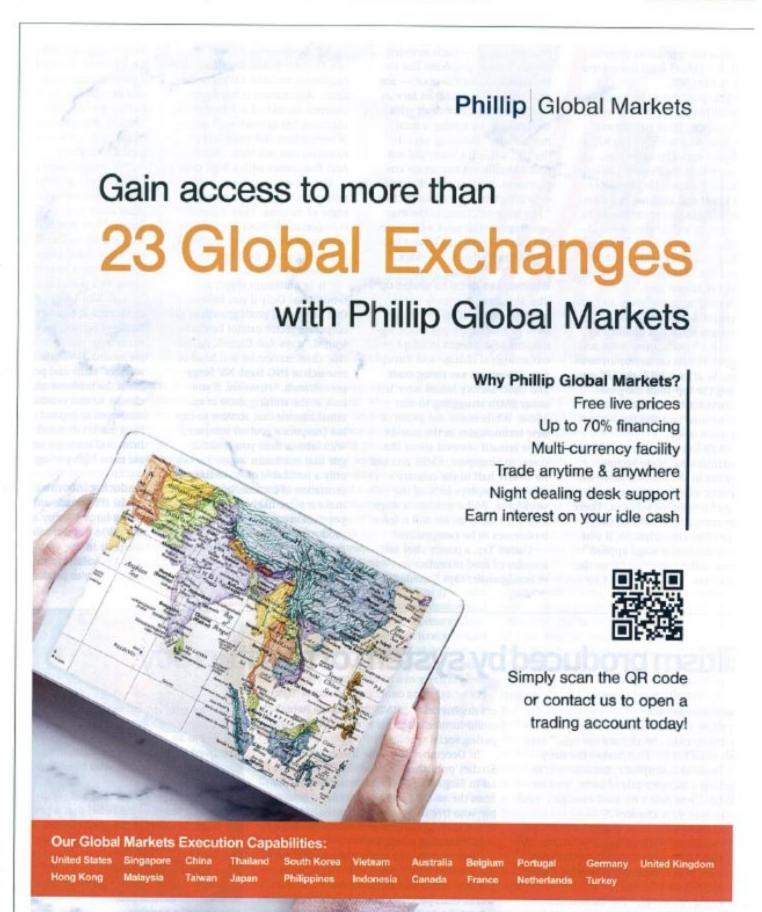es [as] measured by standardised testing and the scholarship system, have attained prominent positions in Singapore in the political, public bureaucracy and economic [spheres]," observes Eugene Tan, associate professor of law at Singapore Management University (SMU).

Elitism, meanwhile, refers to the attitude, associated with being elite, of superiority and the sense of entitlement that comes from the belief that one has proved his or her worth and therefore deserves to be among the elite. And that is where the issue of elites and elitism is beginning to grate a lot more.

Indeed, in today's context, while hard work is undoubtedly a key ingredient to success, one's family circumstances could have just as much impact. "Although one should still be able to succeed based on hard work and abilities even if one is not from a privileged background, it was perhaps easier to do this in the past because many started with similar socio-economic resources," observes assistant professor Nilanjan Raghunath of Singapore University of Technology and Design.

There is another problem with one attributing his or her success solely to hard work. "By extension, you might be saying

Elitism produced by system of meritocracy

that those who fail deserve their failure because they didn't work hard enough," says Kuah of LKYSPP. "That makes the story very crude and simplistic, because you're imposing a morality tale of sorts: 'you are slothful', 'you didn't try hard enough', 'you squandered your chances'."

Yet, the reality, as he points out, is: "We don't hand out rewards based on effort. We only hand out rewards based on outcome. There are people who work very hard and still don't make it in life."

Nilanjan observes, "The current conversations about elitism are centred around how one can access social mobility and success in an increasingly competitive world if one does not have the same access to networks and resources [that are accessible to] those in the upper echelons of society."

Class divide

One thing that everyone seems to be agreed on is that elitism is a concern for everybody, across all segments of society. And, observers warn that there is a risk of the distinction between the elites and oth-

ers degenerating into a class divide, which could further exacerbate inequality by hampering social mobility.

In December 2017, the Institute of Policy Studies published "A Study on Social Capital in Singapore", which found that people from the so-called elite schools and people who live in private residences did not mix with people from non-elite schools and public housing residents.

Interestingly, the study showed that people from an elite school and who lived in private homes had more diverse social networks than people who were from non-elite schools and who lived in HDB flats. For instance, people who lived in private housing had ties to an average of 3.05 people who also lived in private housing and 2.6 people who lived in public housing. People who went to elite schools were friends with an average of 2.7 people who went to the same type of schools and 2.1 people who did not.

Conversely, people who went to non-elite schools were friends with an average of 3.9 people who also went to the same classification of schools, but only an aver-

age of 0.4 people who went to elite schools. And, people who lived in public housing had ties to an average of only 0.8 people who lived in private homes, compared with an average of 4.3 people who lived in public housing.

SMU's Tan points out that a class divide comes as a result of the belief that a person from the other social group or strata is diametrically different in outlook, values and life chances, "that there is contempt for those who are not like them".

It would seem that the sentiment cuts both ways. "Elitism in a small society like ours tends to have a greater impact, especially when socio-economic differentials tend to have a racial, religious and linguistic dimension to them as well," he adds.

What, then, can be done to alleviate the challenges of social mobility, and perhaps the hating on the elites, whether deserved or otherwise? For one, a hard look at Singapore's focus on meritocracy as the guiding principle of progress could be due. This is because as society progresses, the basis of meritocracy also changes. Very simply, people are no longer starting out from the same

point. The second-generation elite would have benefitted from the head start given to them by their parents. "Any elite would be deluding himself if he thought that his success is solely his effort," says Tan.

"As society becomes less equal, the ability for the better-off to protect and pass on their privilege grows larger. This is often because they are able to transmit their privilege to the next generation. The examination meritocracy that we are in further reinforces the difference, where education becomes an 'arms race'," he adds.

Kuah of LKYSPP argues that Singapore's system of meritocracy is "producing some perverse outcomes".

"You have this system of meritocracy because you want to hand out rewards, positions, prizes based on ability rather than connections and positions of power and so forth. But when you have produced capable people and they are in a position now to create connections and wealth and power for themselves, the children of wealth and power become more capable.

"Elitism ends up being a phenomenon produced by our system of meritocracy." **E**