

S'pore needs an A Team at helm: MM Lee **Nation's most critical challenge is risk of losing its talent pool**

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THE most critical challenge Singapore faces in the years ahead is the risk of losing - for good - its best brains to the bright lights elsewhere, from China to the US, says Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew.

'That's the challenge I consider most critical,' he said about the need for Singapore not only to attract its share of talent but, perhaps even more importantly, retain its own core.

Speaking yesterday on 'Singapore 2030' at the Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspectives conference on scenarios for the next generation, Mr Lee said: 'We lose too much of our own talent pool, drawn by top financial institutions taking them to China . . .' It is fine if they return after some years, but many do not, he said.

Citing again the examples of his grandsons, three of whom are studying at US universities, he said that there were 'already initial reservations' about taking up Singapore scholarships, with a view to keeping options open, given the opportunities overseas.

While the majority of his first-generation Old Guard Cabinet were foreign-born, as are a good number of top public office-holders and policymakers here today, Mr Lee said that the 'central core of Singapore-born' remains the critical pillar. 'They are the guarantors of the values, the continuity, the sense of commitment, in any crisis,' he said.

But Singapore does not have the numbers, he conceded, reiterating though that he thought that a future population size of about 5.5 million - rather than 6.5 million - would be viable. The question is the critical talent it can draw - and retain.

'We have to make this city unique,' he said. 'I'm not sure that we can compete with New York or London, but in the Asia context, I think we can compete with Tokyo, Shanghai, with Hong Kong, with Sydney.'

Mr Lee, who started his hour-long session with broad strokes of the future world order - one that assumes that Pax Americana and international order remains - said that whatever the international scenario, Singapore must have an A Team at the helm to lead the country.

'It was a stroke of good fortune that I had a superb team,' he said. And the second A Team were able to produce another line-up.

'The present A Team is good for another two elections,' Mr Lee said, adding that it takes at least one term of office to bring out a really capable minister.

Examples abound in countries near and far of the consequences where the leadership has been less than competent. What is key is whether Singaporeans recognise the need to 'vote in the capable, the solid and the honest', he said.

'We do not have the numbers to ensure an A Team and an alternative A Team.'