

Bringing together foreigners and Singaporeans

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31,489 babies were born between January and October this year, a drop of 3.5 per cent from the same period in 2009, when 32,630 babies were born.

The number of births to Singaporean couples saw an even steeper decline - 17,238 babies, down 5.2 per cent from the same period last year.

While the number of babies born to at least one foreign parent remained relatively stable - at 14,251 in January to October this year compared to 14,440 in the same period last year, a difference of 1.3 per cent.

Singapore's leaders have said the country needs foreigners to compensate for the low birth rate and to maintain economic growth.

And amid ongoing debate over how to further integrate them into society, all eyes are on the new National and Population Talent Division, set up under the leadership of Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng, to formulate such policies.

At the weekly Meet-the-People's session at Bukit Batok East, most residents are there to seek financial help. However, the area's MP said some have also brought up the issue of occasional friction between foreigners and citizens.

But by and large, the two groups have learnt to live together.

MP Halimah Yacob said integration isn't easy, but one thing that would help is better coordination of policies across ministries. She hopes the new agency will address this.

She said: "In the last few years if you look at the way we've handled the issue, is that we're very focused on GDP growth, but somehow there's lack of coordination in ensuring there's a holistic way in which we approach this."

"If MTI or EDB says, I'm bringing in investments worth billions of dollars, I need the workers, that's it, they have to be there. But what does the Ministry of Manpower have to say? What about the Ministry of Education? What do they feel, what kind of pressures will this bring to Singapore?"

For many, the issue is two-fold. First, how to manage the numbers of transient workers, who often take up low-skilled, low-paying jobs that tend to be shunned by Singaporeans. Two, how to attract new immigrants and integrate them into society.

Madam Halimah, who is also Deputy Secretary-General of the National Trades Union Congress, said one thing that the government has done right is to focus on raising the productivity of Singaporean workers and bringing in skilled immigrants who can complement the skills sets of Singaporeans.

However, she feels more effort must be put into reassuring Singaporeans they remain top of the national agenda.

"People do feel that sense of being squeezed out, and so therefore it's important that we constantly put emphasis on fact that these issues are important, and that the government will pay attention to it, and that Singaporeans will always be priority," said Madam Halimah.

In September, the government revealed for the first time, the number of applications for permanent residency received and approved. Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng said in Parliament that some 132,000 people applied to be PRs. 115,900 applications were processed, of which only half - or about 59,500 - were successful.

Dr Leong Chan Hoong, Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies with the National University of Singapore said such transparency is welcomed, and that more should be done to reassure Singaporeans they remain the government's priority.

"Singaporeans who feel they have a stake in this country, who are concerned about the impact of migration, they naturally would like to know how that has changed in the last six months or so...if they can make it on a more periodic basis, that can actually be very reassuring."

Dr Leong said this is especially important now, as foreigners appear to have become the target of public unhappiness over policies - whether it is rising housing prices or competition in schools.

He agreed with the government's stand of sharpening the distinction between citizens and non-citizens, noting it could reassure Singaporeans while providing some incentive for PRs to become citizens.

However, he cautioned that there might be the unintended consequence of hardening the lines between PRs and the citizens.

"There's also a limit to how much you can differentiate the two categories of residents without undermining the cordial relations between foreigners and locals."

Similarly, MP Amy Khor noted that even as authorities continue their engagement efforts, "we should not become xenophobic and drive away foreigners, which will be to our detriment."

Dr Khor is also chair of the government feedback unit, REACH.

MPs said community integration activities have helped, with some of these activities being funded by the National Integration Council.

For former Chinese national Jack Wu, integration is also a matter of time. After 14 years, he said Singapore has become home.

He became a citizen in 2008.

"Changing my passport is just a formality. Before I changed my passport and became Singapore citizen, people already recognised me as a Singaporean. So that's why I feel that the decision I made to be a Singaporean is correct," said Mr Wu.

Figures released in the third quarter of 2010 showed that for the first time, Singapore's total population had crossed the five million mark. The growth of foreign nationals in Singapore has slowed sharply, partly as a direct result of government policies.

But with one-third of the population foreign-born, observers said the challenge for policy-makers going forward is to create enough common ground to bring this diversity together.