

Singapore's leadership 'must not become aged', renewal needed: DPM Teo

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A certain vitality and energy is needed to lead the country and deal with matters of the world, so Singapore's leadership must not become aged, said Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean on Monday (Jan 22).

"You don't want a whole nation to be held hostage to the health of a cohort of people who are already senior and getting more and more senior with each passing year ... We need leadership renewal," said Mr Teo at Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspectives 2018 Conference.

He was responding to a question about senior ministers and whether there will be a larger representation of older people in Government.

While leadership renewal is key, Mr Teo also noted the benefits of having older ministers in Cabinet.

"I would say that because of continuity we had in the political system in Singapore – we are quite unique in that we've had former prime ministers sit in Cabinet as senior ministers or mentor ministers - and that has been a great help to younger ones of us at that time in Cabinet," said Mr Teo.

He added: "I hope that if we do have transition in the future, a new Cabinet, a new Prime Minister, we see the usefulness and benefit of such an arrangement as well."

In his speech earlier, Mr Teo, who is also Minister-in-charge of the civil service, said that Singapore is ageing more rapidly than other countries, but is also better prepared to deal with an ageing population.

"It took France over 100 years to transit from an 'ageing' society, with 7 per cent of the population aged above 65, to an 'aged' society, with 14 per cent of the population aged above 65. It has taken us only 19 years - we crossed that mark last year," he said

Singapore has around 500,000 seniors aged 65 and above today. The number is expected rise to around 900,000 by 2030.

"In fact, our citizens aged 80 and above are expected to be one of the fastest growing segments in our population," Mr Teo noted.

"WE ARE MUCH BETTER PREPARED"

The Deputy Prime Minister said that Singapore has what it takes to help its seniors "age with confidence and vigour", highlighting CPF (Central Provident Fund) Life and MediShield as "game-changers".

"These national social risk-pooling schemes mean that, to a larger extent than before, we are all helping one another to cope better together with the uncertainties associated with ageing," said Mr Teo.

He added that the Government's budget for healthcare will increase, overtaking that for education which is currently the second-largest expenditure item after defence.

"This is already a significant increase from FY2007 when health was just around 0.8 per cent, when there were about 300,000 Singaporeans over the age of 65. This was a three-fold increase as a percentage of GDP. We expect that health expenditure may overtake education in our government budget in the coming years," said Mr Teo.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR SENIORS

Government initiatives aside, Mr Teo said the community can play its part to help seniors live life to the full.

For instance, with the re-employment age raised from 65 to 67 last year, companies are encouraged to re-design jobs with more flexibility to accommodate older workers.

"Only through a change of mind-set and a concerted effort can we help make it possible for our seniors to remain in the workforce for as long as they are able and willing to," Mr Teo told the audience.

He cited the example of Dolly, an automated guided vehicle for food delivery at Changi Airport and SATS which has taken some of the heavy lifting off the workers.

Inter-generational bonding is another aspect that Mr Teo touched on. He pointed out that the Government is co-locating childcare and eldercare facilities to facilitate this.

"The first such site is at Kampung Admiralty where a child care centre and active ageing hub are located side by side. Over the next 10 years, we will extend this to some 10 new HDB housing precincts," he said.

Ultimately, Mr Teo said individuals must change their attitudes towards ageing: "Life-long learning to learn new skills, keeping active through work, exercise, finding meaning through community and voluntary work, and fulfilment with our families."