IPS Institute of
Policy Studies

**Report on IPS Conference on Integration
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The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) held a conference on the issue of local-foreign integration on 21 May 2012 at Orchard Hotel.

In his opening remarks, IPS Director Janadas Devan said that the task of integrating locals and foreigners must be taken as seriously as past efforts to ensure racial and religious harmony. While an open door immigration policy seems inevitable, there is the need to do so in a sustainable manner that matches Singapore's absorptive capacity, with high fences to let in the right individuals and visible speed bumps to slow down that rate of immigration. Once the immigrants are in, they should be welcomed as part of the Singapore Family. Integration is a two-way street where foreigners, or certainly, foreign-born citizens should respect and act according to Singaporean norms. Equally, local-born Singaporeans must be true to these values as well, as intolerance and prejudice are alien to us. The ideal would be for Singaporeans to think in terms of being one united people, regardless of race, language, religion as well as country of origin, as is the hope expressed in the Singapore Pledge.

SESSION ONE

Integration and Immigration: History and Expectations

The first session, chaired by Professor David Chan, Director of the Behavioural Sciences Institute at the Singapore Management University, examined the case for the immigration policy as well as discussed the findings of the IPS Integration Survey.

IPS demographic projections suggest that it will be necessary for Singapore to continue to bring in top-up the population numbers at some level (based on immigration at 30,000, and 60,000) to keep the proportion of working age population constant, said IPS Research Fellow Dr Kang Soon Hock. It is crucial therefore, to think of the ways to integrate immigrants better for this policy of population augmentation to be socially and politically sustainable.

The IPS Integration Survey provides insight into the differences that local-born and foreign-born Singaporeans have about what it takes to identify someone as a Singaporean. IPS Research Fellow Dr Leong Chan Hoong's found that both local- and foreign-born Singaporeans expect immigrants to respect local social norms, but by their responses, neither of the groups expects immigrants to give up their cultural traditions. Local- and foreign-born Singaporeans differed most on the expectation that the male child of an immigrant should complete National Service (NS) (a difference of 26 per cent between responses from the two groups). Other points on which their expectations differed were the need to get on well with workplace colleagues, speak conversational English, be gainfully employed, and exercise good neighbourliness. These differences are potential flashpoints that policymakers and other stakeholders should anticipate.

Respondents who cited fewer markers of integration are considered more inclusive. The study suggests that those who tend to have an inclusive attitude toward foreigners are foreign-born citizens, those with lower education levels, those who live in smaller housing types, have higher income levels, lower levels of national pride, weaker family ties, and feel that immigrants do make an important contribution to the country. It was also found that if the sense of threat to one's well-being increases, foreign-born citizens are likely to be more sensitive to its effects and become more exclusive in their outlook on integration than the local-born.

Discussion

In opening the discussion, Prof Chan said that a meaningful discussion on immigration and integration must start with a consideration of the type of society Singaporeans want. He suggested that the economic benefits of immigration should be considered in the context of recognising these are merely means to an end – of improving the well-being of citizens and advancing Singapore's national interest. Hence the immigration policy has to be discussed in terms of how it improves the lives of Singaporeans.

Even as Singapore continues to bring in immigrants, the infrastructure has to be able to cope with these numbers, said one participant. The author of *Collapse*, Jared Diamond has argued that successful societies collapsed when the growth of population numbers outpaced the ability of the ecosystem to cope. Prof Chan said that there are indeed long-term infrastructural issues that Singapore is starting to address.

Prof Chan suggested that the numbers of foreigners we need should be thought of as an interval rather than a point estimate which would allow for flexibility and uncertainty. The question of whether Singapore had reached the tipping point in its acceptance of foreigners was not an issue of statistics but of an experience of managing social integration.

A participant asked if there had been a decline in the number of new permanent residents (PRs) in Singapore since 2009 because of fewer applications or the tightening of numbers.

Dr Kang said that the data on the number of applications was unavailable and therefore, it was not possible to provide a definitive answer to that.

One participant said that the message of integration was undermined by the new initiatives to create a greater differentiation between the subsidies and access to public services that non-citizens and citizens get. How then could there be equal obligation placed on children of PRs to perform NS further down the road? Dr Leong said that NS was indeed a multidimensional and complex issue, where equity and fairness were central considerations in terms of the physical risks and sacrifices that local-born Singaporeans had to go through. It was thus, only fair that citizenship should come with some privileges. He noted that close to a third of all second-generation NS-liable PRs gave up their PR status before serving NS, which was a cause of some disquiet. Should a security bond be placed on on NS-liable PRs that would be forfeited if they avoid doing NS?

The conversation on equity in policy implementation extended to the experience of foreigners. A participant picked up on a point in Dr Kang's presentation that policies should be even-handed to prevent forcing immigrants into their separate communities. The participant said it seemed understandable that immigrants would require some sort of support base among those of their own kind when they first arrive. On the other hand, it would be good to attract immigrants to participate in activities where they would meet locals, although the involvement from certain nationalities was rather low at this point. Dr Kang agreed and added that immigrants should seek to integrate in the form of participating in activities after the initial period of settling in. The initiatives of the National Integration Council were a good start.

What was the experience of integrating locals and immigrants within the same ethnic category, and how can these fault lines could be managed, asked another participant? In response, Prof Chan said that ethnicity, along with other categories like gender, occupation and class were very salient issues that require further study. There could be the tendency for local-born Singaporeans to have higher expectations, and feel that newcomers in the same ethnic category should be more aware of local social and cultural norms.

A participant said that the birth rate had fallen since the 1970s, and Singapore had adjusted in other ways. So what changed in the 2000s, to account for the sudden jump in number of immigrants? He added that it in other countries, the government does not solve the problem alone, but businesses move to change practices to improve productivity to reduce the level of labour that is needed. Prof Chan said that decision to bring in many immigrants was a political decision in view of the economic imperative. The government had capitalised on a window of opportunity in the mid-2000s, but might not have anticipated the backlash from the ground, where neither the social conditions nor the infrastructure were ready for the influx.

In closing, Prof Chan said that the government typically approaches issues of policy planning and especially immigration by saying that there are clear, rational, long-term challenges and emotions "get in the way". He said that it is better to see that the emotions as being very much a part of the long-term challenge and integrate it in designing policy and programmes.

SESSION TWO

Integration in Daily Lives

In the second session chaired by independent researcher, Dr Evelyn Wong, research findings on integration in the workplace, schools and public housing heartlands were discussed.

Associate Professor Ng Kok Yee and Research Associate Ms Tan Mei Ling from Research for the Center for Innovation Research in Cultural Intelligence + Leadership, Nanyang Business School, Nanyang Technological University explored the concept of 'Cultural Intelligence' (CQ) in the workplace. With 30 percent of the workforce made up of immigrants, CQ is seen as essential skill set for acknowledging cultural differences and dealing with them. In their review of almost 30 large local and multinational organisations, they did not find any institutionalised programmes that addressed this issue. This was unlike the institutionalised approaches that exist to deal with skills and wage disparities. Hence, integration at the workplace would improve if there are more systematic programmes to introduce CQ be it in small and large, local or global firms.

Dr Joy Chew, an independent researcher presented her findings about how Singaporean students felt about having international students (IS), children from other countries who are on special programmes to receive their education here. The results show that an overwhelming percentage of local students do respond positively towards the IS and accept the IS as the new norm. Their presence appeals to Singaporeans' curiosity about the world, as well as their sense of competition and cooperation for academic excellence. She said that there was a higher chance of smooth integration because the IS were admitted selectively and also because they were sprinkled across classes than bunched up in a few classes.

The last speaker on the panel, Dr Mathew Mathews, a Research Fellow from IPS presented his research findings on integration in the heartlands. He found that respondents view "home" as a "haven in a heartless world". As such, the desire to promote integration at such an intimate level, bringing it into the home, increases the perception of threat and is counter-productive. It is better that state policy and programmes be targeted at promoting neighbourliness – something that can be encouraged among all Singaporeans and foreigners equally, across-the-board.

In the discussion, several questions from the audience were posed about the CQ model. Some were worried that cultural tension will continue to exist, and might even be reinforced

through the CQ model. If companies also used "good stereotypes" for fitting the right people to the job – like the notion that Filipinos are very service-oriented and therefore well-suited to service jobs - this might result in essentialising the workers' capabilities, reinforcing typecasts and closing out opportunities for other workers.

Professor Ng reminded the audience that it is not about typecasting, but rather identifying strengths of cultural socialisation that have valuable market value. This would ensure that people are given work that is more "compatible" to them. Professor Ng also acknowledged that the CQ model has its limitations, but nonetheless, can play a part in buffering and easing cultural tensions.

Participants wanted Dr Chew to explain the sampling methodology of her study. One asked if the results would be different if Dr Chew had sampled schools which were better resourced, or the brand-name schools. Would IS have a better reception or worse in such schools? Dr Chew explained that access was regulated by the Ministry of Education (MOE), but she had specified her requirements for a good mix of schools. Unfortunately, as Dr Chew had not conducted such a study between brand-name schools and others, it was moot as to what the experience could or might be like in them.

Dr Chew was asked how the students were selected and whether there might have been a bias and if so, how she addressed that. Dr Chew explained that she could not but allow the school leaders to identify the students she talked to.

The last two sets of questions from the audience were pertaining to the issue of scholarships. One participant wondered if it was worth awarding scholarships to foreign students who might eventually leave for greener pastures; and if the government had given up the harder task of attracting overseas Singaporean back. Another participant asked if it was feasible to award scholarships at a younger age where students might have an easier time of integration.

Dr Chew felt that scholars are more inclined to stay upon graduation as they are offered the jobs in which they were here for in the first place. As for the second suggestion, Dr Chew felt that it was "inconceivable" to tie younger students down through scholarships, and foreign students must be able to decide for themselves if they wish to commit to staying in Singapore.

One participant raised the question of where the tipping point to integration would be; when foreigners left to do what they want becomes an issue of contention with the locals. The

participant cited the example of the "curry incident" where a Mainland Chinese family requested for their Indian neighbours not to cook curry when they were at home. To that, Dr Mathews emphasised that using home as an integration site is an uphill task, and tolerance as a value of being a neighbour should be promoted instead. Situations might become untenable when one's private space is violated.

Two questions were raised on the kinds of programs that would be suitable to promote neighbourliness, with one participant stating that there are structural problems since the mandate of the Resident Committee (RC) is not about integrating foreigners, nor do the RC members have the skills to facilitate integration. Another participant asked if there were indices to measure the level of integration amongst and within the ethnic groups, to serve a yardstick for foreigner integration.

Dr Mathews suggested that a code of norms should be formulated before it can be properly communicated on the ground. He also said that there were as yet no public figures nor data available for comparison of the integration among foreigners and locals within ethnic groups.

SESSION THREE

Integration: Talking about it

Session Three was chaired by IPS Deputy Director Mr Arun Mahizhnan. It focused on the representation of the foreigner in the mass media as well as the cultural interpretation of immigration and integration among Singaporeans.

The first speaker on the panel, Dr Selina Lim, Senior Lecturer at the Teaching and Learning Centre, SIM University, presented her study on the 'Central role of news media in creating perceptions and encouraging social integration'. Studying the 66 articles found in mainstream news media leading up to the General Elections 2011 that were focused on the issue of integration, she said that this mainstream mass media did provide a balance view of foreign integration, ranging from "new citizens portrayed as acquiescent individuals eager to fit in…" to the "tensions between local-born citizens and immigrants".
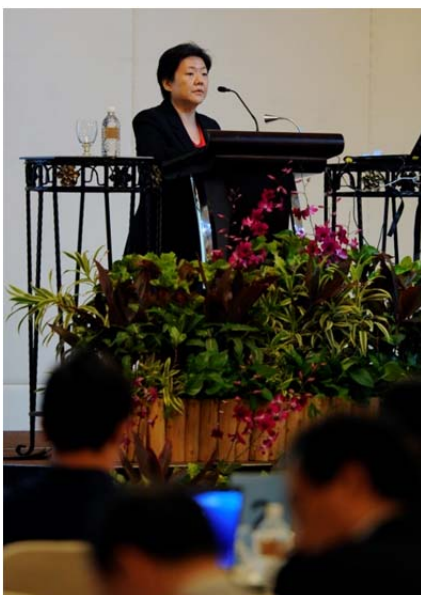
The articles were dominated by government pronouncements and views on the matter. Dr Lim said that themes emerged along the lines of social integration with citizens being concerned over the influx of immigrants, the regulation of immigrant flows by the government, as well as the importance of maintaining a strong citizen core. These were narratives that were conducive and counterproductive to the process of integration. To address the latter and help facilitate integration, Dr Lim said there was the need for a clearer communication of immigration policy, as well as for citizens to deliberate and contemplate the best way forward on both immigration and integration.

Senior Fellow of the Regional Social and Cultural Studies Programme at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Dr Terence Chong, looked at the issue of how immigrants might be using Singapore as a stepping-stone. 49.9 per cent of local-born citizens agreed, and 14.1 per cent strongly agreed that new citizens are likely to use Singapore as a stepping stone to other countries. Apart from questions of cultural difference and economic competition, Singaporean anxieties about immigrants can also be understood as a manifestation of the national narrative – that Singapore is highly vulnerable and struggles to survive as a viable economy and city state. Singaporeans have, naturally, therefore become paranoid and anxious about their survival too. This has translated into three effects at the individual level – first, the '*leap-frog effect*' which is the view that immigrants are not taking on the full burdens and responsibilities of citizenship, yet benefitting from the opportunities Singapore presents. Second, the view of the '*immigrant-scrounger*' that perceives immigrants as wanting citizenship so that they can get a leg up in life, be it for opportunities for education or work. Third, the idea of a '*hungry immigrant*' where the government conveys the idea that immigrants are more driven to take opportunities to succeed, whereas Singaporeans are seen as too soft and complacent.

One participant was of the opinion that the more the media attempted to paint a rosy picture of integration, the more the public resisted this possibility and questioned the credibility of the news media. Similarly, another participant felt that the foreigners should try harder to integrate as well, instead of having the government persist in encouraging locals to make foreigners feel welcome.

Dr Lim agreed. She felt that the traditional mainstream media should also be a platform where citizens can be engaged, and where debates can take place. In order for perceptions to change, debates on what are felt to be the real issues should be visible, and the media should encourage all sides to voice out their views. As for the latter, Dr Lim said that some opinion makers among the immigrant community should do their part, speaking up publicly to encourage their community to integrate.

Two participants asked if the research could have been broadened to include investigation of the material found in the online media – a platform that increasingly contains well put-together and moderate views. The Chinese media was also seen as being more engaging of the public and perhaps the findings would be different if these were included.

While agreeing with the comments, Dr Lim emphasised that although alternative media online is becoming more credible, mainstream media has more resources. Efforts should be directed at the mainstream media to open up more and build up its credibility in discussing the integration issue.

Many in the audience agreed with Dr Terence Chong's view that narratives are one of the more powerful weapons the state can use to shape society. A number of participants called for a rethinking of current discourse on Singapore, and called for ground-up narratives to emerge. One participant said that official "rah-rah" events simply did not cut it with the public, making them resist state efforts even more. Although sound policies required detailed studies, integration involved emotions, and would require solutions that go beyond rationality and pragmatism. Simply put, there is a call for personal stories about integration and narratives, in which consensus about them are built-up through discussion even if they are not always considered "civilized".

Another participant asked Dr Chong if there was space for another narrative instead of the usual ones found in history textbooks. Building on that, another participant asserted that anecdotes can sometime be revelatory, and more resources should be given to civil society organisations that have started work on identity and integration as they can offer viewpoints that might be closer to the ground.

Dr Chong agreed with many of these points. He gave the example of the on-going Singapore Memories Project (organised by the National Library Board), that aims to collect five million memories. This is recognition of the importance of personal narratives; accounts the man-in-the-street is able to provide. However, Dr Chong reminded the audience that there are limits to some parts of the discourse as many of them, like land constraints, are real physical limitations that cannot be ignored, and must be considered seriously.

Some in the audience were concerned that the anxieties mentioned in Dr Chong's presentation were anxieties of the government and perhaps not necessarily those of the people. One participant offered the view that most Singaporeans do not harbour anti-immigrant sentiments, but are simply overwhelmed by the volume and the rate at which the government is allowing them in, severely limiting the chance for gradual integration. So it is public policy at which they are targeting their antipathy. Another participant said that the nation feels helpless when it comes to integration.

In his conclusion, Dr Chong said that the framing of memories is political, and construction of the past is ideologically-driven to counter some contemporary issues. As such, state anxieties are often juxtaposed with anti-immigrant sentiments. Integration also requires the outward commitment of people, and Singaporeans must be clear about the group they are referring to when they talk about integration.

SESSION FOUR

Dialogue with Guest of Honour

The conference culminated in a dialogue session with Acting Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports, and Chairman of the National Integration Council, Mr Chan Chun Sing.

To begin, participants raised a wide-range of questions, comments and suggestions on whether scholarships were being given out to foreigners at the expense of helping locals, the utility of establishing yardsticks of the cost it would take to live comfortably in Singapore, the communication of more information from the government to facilitate engagement and better understanding, the role of businesses in creating family-friendly environments to raise fertility, and the place of the nation-state in the consideration of modern identities, amongst other issues.

In response to these concerns, Acting Minister Chan urged participants to consider the issue of immigration in the larger scheme of things - What are the *ends, ways* and *means* behind Singapore's actions?

On the question of ends, the national interest is to achieve the good life, and opportunities for social and economic development for its people. This would ensure Singaporeans have access to good basic public goods like housing, healthcare and education. Ultimately, the aim of the government is to create opportunities for all Singaporeans. This task has grown more complex as Singapore has developed as a nation, and Singaporeans now have greater material expectations, as well as higher order aspirations. How can Singapore find the resources to meet these expectations and aspirations?

On the ways to achieve this, Singapore could become a global city, or if that was too tough a pace, Singapore could aim to be a satellite town, a retirement town or a city selling niche

services. Each of these strategies comes with its own set of constraints and challenges and not all of them adequately provide the opportunities for Singaporeans to flourish.

On the means that could be employed, the Singapore government had utilised a three-fold approach to its demographic and labour policy - increasing the total fertility rate, labour productivity, as well as immigration. With the projection that the age support ratio will dip from the current level of 7.5 to 2.5 in 2030 if nothing else changes, the workforce would need to triple its productivity for current living standards to be maintained.

There are social choices facing Singaporeans. Acting Minister Chan said it is well and good to say that low-wage workers should be paid more, but this also means that costs of living would increase. Are we prepared to fork out $5 for coffee at a Kopitiam, which would be the result of paying the staff there the equivalent wages of those who worked in Starbucks? To raise Singapore's total fertility rate (TFR) of 1.2 to a higher level as Nordic countries had done successfully, Acting Minister Chan said that Singaporeans would have to consider if they were prepared to accept children born out of wedlock as a social norm.

Singapore is a city state, hence it is crucial to manage these challenges, as citizens in the low income group do not have less competitive areas to move to, the way those in New York are able to, with the hinterland being the rest of America. Singapore had to compensate for its size with speed in which it does things in order to compete with larger countries.

It was Acting Minister Chan's belief that the "Singapore Team" must comprise a strong core of Singaporeans willing to make Singapore work even if their backs are against the wall should any crisis befall us, the way the 1965 generation had done. Economic success has "bought us time" to develop this sense of identity and nationhood which would help us forge in spite of challenges. Without this, we would fail.

The hope is that Singapore would attract immigrants who were not merely seeking economic opportunities, but also those who believed in and supported the system. The awarding of scholarships is not at the expense of the well-being of Singaporeans. There would always be some who use Singapore as a stepping-stone, but the Acting Minister said that this

should not close off all the rest from being part of the "Singapore Team". Singapore aims at bringing in high quality immigrants, but it is not always the case that they will come when we want them.

He added that Singapore could and has tried to maintain its links with Singaporeans based overseas. It would, however, be difficult for Singapore to maintain a diaspora with the same level of emotional connection as the Indian, Chinese or Jewish versions, due to our short national history. There are many competing forms of identity. Are modern identities still based on the sense of nationhood, or do individuals now identify more with large corporations and even social movements? Acting Minister Chan said that for our nation-state to survive, it is important to ensure in some manner that its citizens are sufficiently rooted to it. This is an imperative in all that we do.

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