

Immigrants a buffer for falling birth rate

Rachel Chang

The Straits Times, 26 January 2010

SINGAPORE will be grappling with the issue of immigration for some time because it has no alternative to topping up the population, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong noted.

The number of newborns here continues to stay below the replacement level of 2.1 - the average number of children every woman must have in order for a society to replace itself.

This is despite the Government's efforts to boost birth rates. As a result, topping up the population through immigration is necessary, Mr Lee said yesterday.

But as immigration has become a sensitive issue among Singaporeans, this would be done in a 'measured and calibrated manner', he added.

While the policy is designed to benefit Singaporeans, some citizens perceive newcomers as unwelcome competition, he noted.

'The Government understands these sentiments,' he said, pointing out that policies had been tweaked to distinguish more clearly between citizens and permanent residents (PRs).

These include changes in housing, education and health care, with PRs getting lower health-care subsidies and paying more in school fees.

The Government is also moderating the inflow of foreigners, he pointed out.

In citing the underlying reason, he said: 'We don't want to shift the tenor of our society, we don't want to dilute the Singapore spirit. We must not feel, or make Singaporeans feel, that our home has become different or alien.'

But he also urged Singaporeans to examine the issue 'dispassionately' and to understand the realities of the situation.

Even as such new stresses are being dealt with, Mr Lee reminded people not to forget the old faultlines of Singapore society:

'Our various races and religions enjoy good relations, but it is only the result of constant tending and vigilance.'

The sensitivity of race and religion in South-east Asia was placed in the spotlight by recent religious tensions that erupted in Malaysia over a court ruling allowing non-Muslims to use the word 'Allah'.

Said Mr Lee: 'We must not let our guard down or allow these external problems to affect our own precious and unique harmony.'

After addressing the issue of those arriving in Singapore, Mr Lee reached out to those who have left. About 180,000 Singaporeans are living overseas for work or study at any one time.

Striking a sentimental note in addressing them, he said: 'We hope that wherever you are, whatever you are doing, Singapore will forever be in your hearts, and you will always remember that Singapore is here, waiting for you.'