

Local bosses sit better with some Singaporeans

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LAST year, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) asked over 4,000 Singaporeans to talk about race, language and religion.

Not all the answers were pretty, and some, when it came to nationality, were downright alarming.

Nearly one in three respondents felt that prejudice based on a person's country of origin has grown, compared to five years ago.

In fact, Singaporeans seemed to indicate they were more comfortable among their own, compared to new citizens from India, China or elsewhere.

For instance, 91.5 per cent of non-Chinese respondents were happy to have a local-born Chinese as a close friend. In contrast, only 77.4 per cent would be comfortable if a close friend was a Chinese from China.

Respondents prefer local bosses, too, with only 73.7 to 77 per cent indicating they would not mind reporting to a new citizen originally from China, India or elsewhere in the region. That figure rises to between 83.1 and 93.8 per cent if the boss is locally born.

Said IPS research fellow Mathew Mathews, who headed the survey: "Some Singaporeans sense that their own nationality is sometimes not properly appreciated, when companies may readily hire foreigners compared to locals."

Sociologist Tan Ern Ser said that, while "xenophobic" is too strong a word to describe Singaporeans, their dislike of foreigners may stem from competition over amenities, space and jobs.

The apparent discomfort extends to language.

In the survey, university-educated Singaporeans were asked if they are fine with service staff not speaking to them in English in an Orchard Road shop.

The majority of Malays, Indians and other races said they were not. Almost half of Chinese respondents said they were.

Said Dr Mathews: "Minorities were particularly concerned about this issue, compared to the Chinese, since they are less likely to be able to communicate in Mandarin, which might be the default language some service staff who are from China may use."

Singaporeans are used to having a diversity of races and nationalities around them, said Associate Professor Tan. But when it comes to receiving services, they expect good, efficient service, which can be hindered by language problems.

The survey found that levels of racial prejudice were about the same, or lower, compared to five years ago.

But about one in four Malays and Indians felt they had been discriminated against when it came to jobs or promotions.