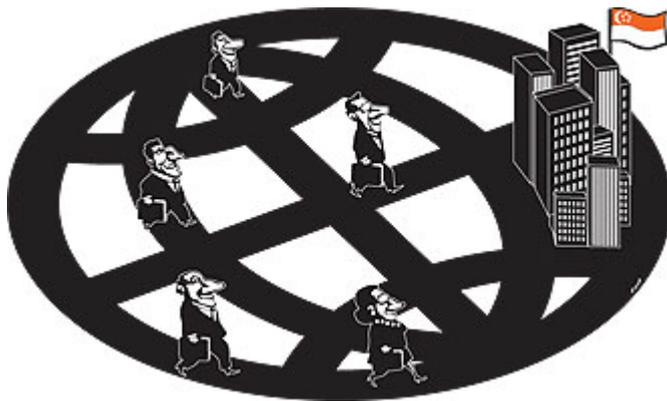


Making Singaporeans feel this is home in a global city

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The Straits Times, 18 January 2011



IN THE past 10 years, we have made great strides towards becoming a global city and society. We have attracted many international players in industries such as pharmaceuticals, biotechnology, alternative energy, aerospace engineering and tourism. We have broadened and deepened the base of our economy. The developments around Marina Bay have created one of the most striking downtown landscapes in the world. Our residential heartlands are also being remade and rejuvenated.

Our voice is heard in international forums and taken seriously only because we are successful. If we are not, no one will pay attention to us. According to a study by Foreign Policy magazine, consulting firm A.T. Kearney and the Chicago Council, Singapore is one of the top 10 global cities in the world in terms of how much influence it has beyond its own borders, and how well it interacts with global markets, culture and innovation.

Yet not all Singaporeans are comfortable with the pace of change and developments. I can understand why, and I empathise with them. Some point out that the pace of life has picked up too fast, and they are experiencing higher levels of stress. Some attribute problems related to congestion and increased prices to the presence of many foreigners, and feel we should admit fewer of them. Others are concerned about potential erosion of our Singaporean identity, as we become more cosmopolitan. In short, some Singaporeans wonder whether a global city can also be an endearing home.

For Singapore, becoming a global city is not merely an aspiration. It is a pre-requisite for our survival. Being open is the only viable option for us if we wish to be self-reliant and continue to prosper. Closing our doors would only turn us into an island of no consequence, unable to provide for our people. We will become irrelevant to the world. Being open allows us to connect and trade with the rest of the world, and to attract the best investments and talents to Singapore. Being open also helps us to overcome our physical constraints and small population.

At the same time, Singapore has to be more than a global city. More than anything else, this is our home, a place where we belong. Other global cities like New York, London, Tokyo and Hong Kong, are connected to wider hinterlands which provide a constant source of skills and labour to sustain their competitiveness. People in these cities can opt to move out of the city to another part of the same country for a more leisurely pace of life, lower costs of living. As a small city state, we are not like New York, London or Tokyo. Our city is our country and our home.

Most global cities have sizeable populations. New York, London, Tokyo and Hong Kong all have populations of between seven and nine million. Many aspiring global cities, like Shanghai, have much more. While population size is not everything, it provides the critical mass to attract investors and grow domestic markets. Singapore, however, is a compact city state, and any growth in population size must be balanced against the need to maintain a liveable environment and a harmonious ambience.

Global cities are also centres of change, open to constant flows of people, capital, technology and ideas. To thrive, global cities remake themselves from time to time. Too much change, however, and we risk losing the essence of home. Home is about familiarity, stability and comfort. We want to retain the vibrancy and dynamism of a city on the move, without eroding the sense of belonging and pride in our shared heritage.

The way forward

RESOLVING these tensions of size and change will be tough, but it is not 'mission impossible'. These are the challenges that will drive and shape the work of the newly inaugurated National Population and Talent Division (NPTD). The NPTD's key function is to formulate, coordinate and review the whole of government policies related to population and talent. It will focus on achieving a sustainable population profile. It is about navigating a path that allows us to grow as a global city, yet remain a distinctive and endearing home. In doing so, the NPTD, with other government departments and agencies, will be guided by three key principles.

- The first principle is to retain and preserve what is unique and distinct about Singapore.

To some, what makes Singapore distinct is the presence of family and friends, and the treasured memories of growing up in Singapore. To others, it could be our unique food culture, or our way of life. To Singaporean men, it is the memorable experience of national service which has instilled a deep sense of why we must defend our country.

To me, what is distinctive and unique about Singapore boils down to two aspects. One is our national character, shaped by our forefathers and by our journey in nation-building. Being descendants of immigrants who had to make a living on unfamiliar shores, we value hard work, thrift and honesty. This is the basis of our meritocratic society.

Despite living in a highly urbanised environment, many of us still subscribe to the *gotong royong* spirit of neighbourliness and mutual assistance. We can be competitive, or *kiasu*, but we also have a strong tradition of philanthropy, volunteerism and caring for one another. We can see this in the early years when migrants came to settle down in Singapore, where they extended mutual help to one another. We are an orderly, law-abiding people, but not so serious that we cannot poke fun at ourselves, with a humour that is folksy and unpretentious.

But no matter how much better life has become for us, all true-blue Singaporeans will readily sit down at a hawker centre table and heartily enjoy the same hawker food

that nourished our forefathers decades ago. Our habits and character as a people reflect the simplicity of our roots.

Second is our multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual society. Our diverse roots and decades of living together helped us to understand the importance of tolerance, harmony and unity which have been painstakingly fostered and nurtured. This is a unique feature of Singapore which we must treasure. Most of us are so used to this that we do not even think of it as unusual. It has become part of our DNA. But to the casual visitors, this is an achievement that they truly marvel and admire.

In managing our population, we will always be guided by the need to preserve a strong citizen core, and to maintain stability in our ethnic mix.

- The second principle is to ensure that growth and change is for the benefit of Singaporeans.

One tangible benefit of becoming a global city is our increased links with the rest of the world. As we grow, there will be an increase in job opportunities. The strong economic growth last year corresponded with low unemployment rates. While growth in 2011 is unlikely to be as exceptional as in 2010, there will be many job opportunities available for Singaporeans. There are many measures in place for Singaporeans to upgrade their skills.

With economic growth come more choices and options to enrich our lives. Today, we see services or products that would have been considered 'niche' 20 years ago. As recently as 10 years ago, the Esplanade, a world-class theatre and performance venue, did not exist. Even in essential areas such as education, economic growth has expanded our choices. We have now many pathways beyond O levels. And they can achieve their full potential: If they're good sportsmen, they go to the Sports School. Potential artists go to our Arts School. And they don't have to leave home to pursue these interests today.

The Government has pledged that Singaporeans' interest comes first. We will continue to ensure that any growth and change is to the benefit of Singaporeans.

Ensuring sufficient manpower for economic growth and mitigating the impact of ageing are two other needs that must be managed in achieving a sustainable population profile for Singapore.

The key hurdle to achieving a sustainable population lies in our local fertility rate, which is quite weak. For more than 30 years, we have not been having enough babies to replace ourselves. Preliminary estimates indicate that our resident total fertility rate has fallen to 1.16 in 2010, even lower than the 1.22 recorded in 2009. The going is hard, but we have not given up. We will continue to support couples' decisions to get married and have children, and aim to create a pro-family environment. To be realistic, however, we must accept that boosting fertility will take time. For the foreseeable future, we will need to tap immigration to augment our population, to support economic growth and to mitigate the impact of ageing.

- The third principle is to stay nimble and be ready to make adjustments along the way.

We will continue to monitor the impact of our population policies closely and introduce refinements when necessary. We have already tightened the immigration framework to better manage the inflow and quality of new immigrants in the last quarter of 2009. As a result, the number of new permanent residence passes granted has been falling - from 59,460 in 2009, to 29,265 in 2010, and we have observed an

improvement in the quality of new permanent residents (PRs). Because we have been able to attract new citizens of good quality, the number of new citizenships granted has remained relatively steady at 19,928 for 2009 and 18,758 for 2010.

We have also drawn sharper distinctions between the benefits Singaporeans, PRs and other foreigners enjoy, in areas such as housing, education and health care. This underlines our principle that Singaporeans will enjoy priority over non-citizens.

Singapore's population story is still evolving. Continual refinements need to be made at appropriate junctures to ensure that Singapore will remain our best home. Like other countries around the world, we must continue to welcome suitably qualified people to work and live in Singapore, and contribute to our society. Whatever we do, we will ensure that Singaporeans will benefit from growth and change. The benefits will be concrete. We will not leave behind those who need more help. The surpluses we have set aside in good times can be tapped to look after the needs of the old and the poor.

This is an edited extract of a speech by the Deputy Prime Minister and Coordinating Minister for National Security at the Singapore Perspectives 2011 conference yesterday. He is also the Minister in charge of the National Population and Talent Division.