

Can S'pore relook immigration policies to prioritise talent, ties to S'pore over maintaining racial quotas?

The panel discussed the importance of striking balances and the process of policy-making.

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Can Singapore's immigration policy be amended to prioritise those with strong ties to Singapore, belief in the country, and valuable talents over maintaining racial quotas?

This question was raised by Paul Anantharajah Tambyah, chairman of the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) and professor at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore.

Tambyah was an attendee at the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) Singapore Perspectives 2025 conference on Jan. 20, 2025.

A "delicate" balance is needed

Aaron Maniam, panel speaker and fellow at the Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford, addressed the question, emphasising the need for "delicate" balancing in Singapore's policymaking.

While he shared Tambyah's vision, Maniam stressed that policies must reconcile recognition of diverse talents and commitments with practical constraints like space and societal capacity.

He added that while ideally, we recognise varied forms of commitment beyond employment contributions, we also need to consider the public's comfort level with significant changes to the population and the carrying capacity that the country will have.

Cherian George: "Never lose humility"

Cherian George, a professor at Hong Kong Baptist University's School of Communication, highlighted the importance of policy-making processes alongside the policies themselves.

He argued that policies may lack credibility among some Singaporeans due to perceived notions of the government.

"In their eyes, it is the government with the record of being pro-business, leaving enough loopholes for employers to exploit at the expense of the Singaporean worker."

Rather than finding the perfect balance from a policy-model perspective, George said it is about "public relevance".

He urged Singapore to "never lose the humility in our 60th year" and continue studying how other countries handle such complex issues.

George advocated for public consultation, in a way that has "an arms-length relationship with the government".

"This approach to managing wicked problems, especially problems that involve moral trade-offs, has been proven to work if we want to solve this, at least make this immigration issue, less polarising, and less toxic," he said.

Should Singapore maintain racial quotas?

Moderator Chan Heng Chee, Ambassador-at-Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, responded by emphasising Singapore's humility in wanting to learn from others.

She noted that our officials regularly go overseas to learn from different governments, countries, and societies.

Addressing Tambyah's question, Chan highlighted the issue of "the optical presentation of numbers", explaining why it is hence, important to maintain racial quotas concerning immigration.

"I think, minority communities if they see the numbers shrinking, it has a very destabilising effect. So I would not so easily stop worrying about quotas. I think quotas and having the numbers there give some sense of comfort."