

VIEWPOINT

Thanks for wanting to leave



BY WOON WUI TEK

FRESH research by the Institute of Policy Studies has found that 20 per cent of Generation Yers wish to fly the Singapore coop.

Statistics of this nature are churned out regularly and, it seems to me, a strangely **zero-sum approach** is typically adopted in discussing them: We take it to be "good news" if the proportion of a population wishing to emigrate is low, and the news is invariably "better" the lower that proportion is.

I suggest, however, that a country should be grateful if a significant number of its people want out: Indeed, it would be worrying if no one was eyeing greener pastures.

Let me first sling the cliché of the century: People are different.

Different people have different views about what "the good life" is like, what the right tax rate is or how much should be spent on the arts. Now, a good government should certainly try to be inclusive, offering something for everyone. Ultimately, however, decisions must be made, priorities set and parameters drawn.

The upshot is that, in any country, a decent-sized chunk of the population will find themselves on the losing side of numerous deep-seated debates.

We could pretend that such folk have no choice but to suck it up and live with the settled **consensus**.

But the world is a big place and there are many, many alternative societal solutions out there. All, in today's Web-linked universe, are effectively open to scrutiny, like so many shop-window displays.

With such a profusion of options, what should we make of a nation whose citizens overwhelmingly professed nothing but devotion to the system?

I'm guessing that such folk would live in paradises like North Korea, where everyone is assigned a nice set of official blinkers and is ignorant of anything beyond propaganda.

Even in a capitalist heaven like the United States, there must be plenty of people who – if they know enough about how other societies functioned and can escape such all-consuming stereotypes as "the land of the free" – would acknow-

ledge the allure of some "un-American" systems.

Of course, if half a population are stampeding for the exits, something is probably deeply wrong.

But setting aside such extreme scenarios, there are other reasons why we should not deplore the emigrant dreams of some of our compatriots.

For one thing, I believe that folk disgruntled enough to seriously consider divorcing themselves from their home cultures are likely to be especially honest critics.

At the very least, their take on things would be essentially different from those of people who, at heart, think "the system works". Their commentary might be **trenchant**, even brutal – but it could well be laced with cruel truths.

We need not accept everything they say as the gospel truth. But if we are centred and confident enough, theirs could be a valuable perspective.

Furthermore, I'm not saying that we should cheerfully cast off potential emigrants as a snake sloughs off dead skin.

In immigrant societies, from the US to Singapore, it is a cherished belief that those who abandon their roots to begin new lives are the cream of the crop: They are the heroic **pioneers** brimming with initiative, drive and the entrepreneurial spirit.

If so, then many of the people seeking to depart these shores are especially worth retaining.

If their dreams could be accommodated, if they can be plugged back into their native societies, would that not be the ultimate vindication of the national agenda?

And even if success is not achieved in each case, effort taken to deeply explore and revalidate our soul will not have been wasted.

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◆ *The writer, who was born in Malaysia, was a journalist for over a decade. A Singapore permanent resident and former foreign editor of my paper, he now works in a bank.*

HELPDESK 我的字典

Zero-sum approach: 零和方式
líng hé fāng shì

Consensus: 共识 gòng shì

Trenchant: 言辞犀利的 yán cí xī lì de

Pioneers: 先驱 xiān qū