

Singaporeans can afford a dose of magnanimity

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Twelve years ago, a man from Singapore travelled 8,500km to Wellington, New Zealand, to pursue an education.

Although he had little money, he took a chance and took along his wife and their newborn son, guided by nothing more than a dream.

He soon discovered that life was not a bed of roses in the picturesque capital city. Casual jobs were not easy to come by and money was always in short supply. The Singaporean would scrimp on every penny so that his family could get the best.

One day, his son fell ill and he had to pick up prescription drugs from the pharmacy. It was far from payday and he was not sure how the cost of the medication would affect the family budget for the rest of the week.

Nevertheless he mustered all his courage and said to the chemist at the drugstore in his best Kiwi: "G'day mate, cu'ya gettme wannaf these for my little boy?"

"Sure mate, hope ya' kid feels better," said the chemist.

The man picked up the medicine and left without paying.

Nothing else is shared between the two, and nothing more is required. The Singaporean man knew that medical care and medication was free for all New Zealand residents below the age of seven.

His son took a while to recover, and the man had to make multiple visits to the same chemist for the prescription drugs. Each time, the same conversation was re-enacted.

On the last trip to the chemist, feeling somewhat guilty, I asked the chemist if he had known that I was not a resident of the country, and hence, strictly speaking, was not entitled to the subsidies.

To my surprise, the chemist replied: "I don't wanna know, mate, hope ya' kid is fine." I could never imagine an event like this unfolding in Singapore, given the layers of authentication in our water-tight system when it comes to access to subsidies.

I would not say that I am proud of my Kiwi impersonation. Nor do I condone anyone who callously siphons off social benefits that do not belong to them.

But I do believe that there are occasions when a person can show some magnanimity in weighing minor transgressions, and that the system ought to allow for such discretion.

Many of the social policies in Singapore today are dispensed under a highly structured and convoluted set of guidelines that predetermine the individual's right to state support - how much, by whom and at what point in time.

Our policies are calibrated to the nth degree to meet a specific objective for a specific people.

For instance, you receive a certain percentage less in benefits from the state as a permanent resident; but if you are married to a citizen, you get more bang for your residency. Subsidies for childcare services are meant to support working mothers, so good luck to you if you are a homemaker who needs to put your children in pre-school.

We have reached a perverted stage in applying the jurisprudence of entitlement.

This clinical orientation to welfarism was, in part, born out of a political ethos based on exclusion that explicitly denied rights to some groups. Stringent criteria such as income ceilings or minimum years of residency are designed to exclude most people from such entitlements, leaving only a narrow group to qualify.

Any programme that inadvertently lets in an individual or group outside the pre-defined framework is classified as an injustice that requires rectification. "Loopholes" - such as allowing a student to "pretend" to be a resident - are assiduously closed. Those who take advantage of a system or do not comply are punished.

To be sure, welfare benefits are costly. So criteria are essential, as are policies to keep out those who deliberately game the system.

But at the margins, I sometimes think we in Singapore can afford to be a little more generous, to shut the proverbial eye now and then, for those among us who may need some help.

If we are serious in fostering a culture of generosity, graciousness and magnanimity - to both foreigners and Singaporeans alike - we need to take a hard look at ourselves and ask if we have ever made any special gesture to a community that does not fall within the category of those who "deserve" state assistance, but who would benefit from it nevertheless.

Can we afford to relax our rules a little, to let the foreigners living in our midst enjoy some peace of mind in medical care? To be kinder to minority groups, such as gays, unmarried mothers, singles and all those not part of the mainstream?

A truly global and inclusive city is not defined solely by the quality of its infrastructure, the demographic texture or the number of Michelin-starred restaurants.

It includes the ability to look beyond the divisive line of politics, and to reconnect with our humanist instinct to look out for one another.

Wellington taught me many lessons, the most important being the beauty of kindness and the importance of treating one another with mutual respect and dignity, regardless of backgrounds.

I will always remember the chemist with gratitude, and think of Wellington as a global city for its heart.

I wonder sometimes if there are foreigners living in our midst who think likewise of Singapore.

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