

## **Bridge the foreign-local gap with NS**

***Leong Chan-Hoong***

***The Straits Times***, 10 May 2012

If Singapore had a social thermometer that could gauge public sentiment on national policies, immigration would probably top the list, given the spate of recent articles on the angst locals feel about the influx of foreigners to this city-state.

What has contributed to the simmering tension? We need to understand why people resent the influx of foreigners. There are two main reasons. The first is economic. Foreigners compete for jobs, and cause strains on transport and health-care infrastructure. An influx of foreigners is perceived to have reduced housing and education opportunities.

The second is social and cultural. This involves the norms, heritage and values embraced by the majority. Locals who see their social standing and ethos eroded by the growing number of foreign-born residents will react defensively to protect their values and heritage.

The Government has in recent years calibrated the influx of immigrants and transient workers. Public amenities and accommodation are being ramped up to meet the demands of the growing population. In the provision of welfare, education, housing and medical services, the distinction between permanent residents (PRs) and citizens has been sharpened. The policy differentiation aims to provide greater security among citizens, while simultaneously dangling a carrot before PRs to persuade them to apply for a Singapore passport.

Do these concerted efforts promote integration and enhance Singaporeans' sense of security? Probably.

Can we do better? Definitely.

The policies that have been adopted increase locals' access to resources so they can compete better with foreigners. They mitigate the economic threats, but do little to tackle the social and cultural ones.

And what are the social and cultural issues? In a study conducted by the Reach Policy Study Workgroup two years ago, National Service (NS) emerged as a key bugbear in the foreign-local divide. This finding is consistent with the result of a recent study conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies.

Singaporeans are dismayed that not all immigrants are enlisted, and that second-generation PRs can renounce their residency to avoid conscription. Some PRs reportedly delay acquiring residency for their male offspring until they are past enlistment age.

On the other hand, Singaporeans who have completed full-time NS are liable to be recalled for duties, putting them at a relative disadvantage compared to other young professionals from abroad. The Ministry of Defence revealed last November that one-third of NS-liable 18-year-old PRs chose not to fulfil their obligations and gave up their residency.

NS as a social institution embodies many of the shared principles that Singaporeans deeply cherish. It is the best demonstration of equality and impartiality, and is a distinctive rite of passage for Singaporean men and their families.

The trend of PRs skipping NS will ruffle the social fabric between immigrants and locals.

While Singapore has fine-tuned policies to give more benefits to citizens over PRs, we have yet to reach a consensus on the sharing of obligations.

Forging a more collegial relationship between the locals and the foreign-born will be difficult so long as locals feel they bear the bulk of the social burden. Policymakers should take the bull by the horns and address the issue of inequality in serving National Service, whether real or perceived.

While it is unrealistic to expect first-generation PRs to serve NS, it should be made mandatory for their children to be enlisted if Junior is to become a PR.

Right now, sons of PRs who want to remain as PRs or become citizens must serve NS when they turn 18. If they choose not to do so, they would have to give up their permanent residency and may face severe consequences like never getting PR again in Singapore, or not being able to obtain a work visa in Singapore.

What I am proposing is to remove that choice and make it mandatory for children of PRs to serve NS.

This means that foreigners who wish to apply for permanent residency for their children should be given a realistic preview of NS and be properly counselled by immigration officers before they submit their children's PR application.

To ensure that they understand the NS imperatives, parents who want to apply for PR for their children should have to put up a security bond for them.

When these children come of age, they will then be liable to serve NS if they want to remain as PRs or become citizens. If they do not want to serve NS, parents forfeit the NS bond, and the children give up their PR.

Singapore citizens have to put up a security bond if their sons study overseas, which is forfeited if they do not return to fulfill their NS obligations at 18.

The security bond for children of PRs will make sure that only families keen to remain in Singapore for the long term apply for PR for their children. This reduces one major source of dissatisfaction: that PR families view Singapore as a 'stepping stone' to getting residency in the industrialised West.

If a family forfeits the security bond, and the youth gives up his PR status, the money recovered can be seen as a way for the state to 'claw back' subsidies enjoyed by the youth in education and other subsidies.

Imposing an NS requirement for children of PRs and formalising it with a security bond may go some way towards removing the sense of unfair treatment felt by Singaporeans on the NS issue.

***The writer is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, NUS. He served as the vice-chairman of the 2010 Reach Policy Study Workgroup on integration.***