

Developing a sense of rootedness

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IN JULY, I spoke at two youth forums on how to retain Singaporean talent. It was heartening to find young Singaporeans calling for more to be done, whether by cultivating affective ties among our people or by pragmatic solutions like extending dual citizenships. Will Singapore become a one-generation pit stop?

Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew said in February that Singapore is losing 1,000 capable people 'at the top end' every year. The Government has attracted foreign talent, so despite losing our own and our low fertility rates, we have a net 'brain gain'. What is unclear is whether a higher presence of foreigners might not precipitate an even greater exodus of Singaporeans.

How far should we go with this substitution and topping-up process? Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said in April that political leaders had to have been brought up here. In July, MM Lee said that at least 65 per cent of the resident population should be Singaporeans born and bred here so immigrants would know 'how we got where we are today, and why we do things in a certain way'.

Obviously, there is concern that it would not be in Singapore's interest to have too many foreigners here not in sync with our socio-cultural and political milieu, regardless of their talent. Others would argue that only foreigners who like the Singapore system would stay - and thereby reinforce, not erode, the system.

How do we develop the sense of rootedness among citizens and other residents? 'Rootedness' expresses a strong sense of attachment to place and its accompanying socio-political culture.

First, there is physical familiarity - an ease with our physical setting. Rootedness increases if we feel our neighbourhoods serve us well. In a small city-state like ours, it is a challenge to be attractive to everyone. Urban planners, businesses, conservationists and citizens have to be in constant dialogue with one another.

Second, there is social connection, being part of a 'community of concern'. Family and friends, the religious or voluntary groups we

belong to, reinforce the sense of rootedness. Scholars track how different racial and religious communities relate to one another, while intellectuals and journalists ask what support we should provide to disadvantaged groups. Businesses too must be part of this 'community of concern' - in their treatment of working mothers and seniors, for instance - even as the rest of us are concerned about their profitability.

Third, there is autobiographical attachment - the sense that our personal history as well as future are intertwined with this place. Having fond memories of growing up here would help Singaporeans envisage living out their years here. In this regard, we have to pay attention to our children's formative years. Rootedness is not simply a matter of what we teach them in National Education; it is also their daily lived experiences in school, at play, in communities. What do they think of the foreign students in their classes?

Fourth, there is the sense of passive belonging, stemming from the benefits, comforts and opportunities that Singapore has to offer. These include affordability, work opportunities, clean water and a good transportation system. We have come to expect these of life in Singapore but they cannot be taken for granted.

The cost of living has risen recently, disproportionately so for lower-income families. Some price increases are unavoidable, but it is cold comfort to be told that Singapore is not as expensive as London or New York - yet. Since Singapore is a country as well as a city, opting out of the city because a certain quality of life becomes unaffordable would mean opting out of the country altogether.

Fifth, there is the sense that citizens have a say in national affairs, that their views and actions can make a difference. Singapore is usually spoken of as a construct of the People's Action Party Government: The Government led and the people followed.

But citizens, civic leaders and intellectuals have also shaped the country. Documenting these would encourage further participation - and thus rootedness.

The consultative committee to address the 1985 recession that Mr Lee Hsien Loong chaired is one example. This year, Professor Lim Pin's committee on longevity insurance is another. Other examples include citizens and experts committees giving input to the Government, and grassroots Inter-racial and Religious Confidence Circles. Think-tanks are publishing more commentary in the media.

Singapore is often criticised for not having a more lively political scene. But the rules on political commentary and activity are being

liberalised, on- and off-line. Political parties will increasingly have to compete with these channels.

But will debate on controversial issues like homosexuality, abortion, censorship, welfare, and so on, divide us or reinforce our sense of rootedness? Will we be able to disagree agreeably, or will we run to the Government to mediate disagreements? The latter would defeat the purpose of greater political openness.

Finally, we should make it easy for the 'Singaporean diaspora' to return. Recently, I met two Singaporean friends based in Silicon Valley who are exploring the possibility of growing their business here. Why wait till they are the size of Creative before we roll out the welcome mat?

The concept of rootedness is multi-faceted and offers many hints as to how we might retain Singaporean talent even before we start thinking about offering dual citizenships.

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