

The quota and its limitations

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"It was not an experiment ... It was force majeure. We inflicted it on the people, we knew it would work, we knew it would be uncomfortable."

(Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew, Jan 27, 2010, HDB Dialogue session)

The issue of foreigner enclaves in Singapore's public housing estates has been gathering momentum since the middle of last year.

In January, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew was asked if the Ethnic Integration Policy with its ethnic quotas in public housing estates might be extended to include new Singaporeans. And last Friday, the Government announced an extension of quotas to include permanent residents (PRs).

The concern, which forms the backdrop to this quota extension, is two-fold: First, that PRs might be out-bidding Singaporeans for resale flats; and second, that flats are being marketed on the basis of their attraction to certain nationalities.

The HDB stated in end-January that PRs were buyers of about 20 per cent of HDB resale flats, and 8 per cent of the 2.92 million residents living in public housing. Hence, the first concern can only be settled by evidence that PRs pay higher cash-over-valuation prices for flats.

The second is only a lightning rod for the lumpy distribution of foreigners, writ large, including those renting flats in our housing estates. The PRs now bear the brunt of this, while flat-owners are still at liberty to rent and therefore insert foreigners deep into our heartlands. For that reason, the rule may not be so effective, but perhaps it will salve over some public antipathy there has been on the issue.

So it seems that the overwhelming force of the state, or "force majeure" as MM Lee called it, has come down on the issue.

However, the law has its limitations. It is indeed only human to congregate with those whom one identifies with. In a foreign land, it is comforting and practical to live with people from one's homeland where possible.

With a critical mass, services and shops would similarly be drawn to provide a taste of home. If that is not possible, these amenities are often centralised and dispersed populations are then drawn to them when the need arises.

In this way, types of "bonding social capital" - which Harvard professor Robert Putnam conceptualised as the sociological superglue which brings people of similar backgrounds, be it nationality or ethnicity, together - happen more naturally and they reinforce their exclusive identities.

Types of "bridging social capital" - a sort of sociological WD-40 where there is a sense of affiliation, trust, shared resources and destiny among otherwise heterogeneous groups - are more challenging.

In Singapore, life is largely structured around four circles based on the notions of ethnicity - Chinese, Malay, Indian and the catch-all group "Others".

By administrative fiat, people in this national institution called public housing are dispersed and expected to integrate and bond in this "common space". Grassroots organisations are mobilised to do the work of developing "bridging social capital" within this diversity.

While HDB and PA surveys suggest improved neighbourly relations over time, I would wager that the over-whelming definition of life in the HDB estate in the minds of dwellers is not the horizontal one between neighbours but the vertical relationship with the Government.

This will range from the language of being stakeholders with the roof over their heads, to the language of being good citizens that have to keep their estates clean and safe, and clients subject to regulations on buying, selling, and use of their flats.

The horizontal relationship between neighbours, however, is relatively under-developed and remains so.

This resides in the goodwill of a few who might have the personality, the time and inclination to reach out to their fellow residents whether informally, or through formal grassroots organisations and programmes of the National Integration Council, which themselves are a construct of the state.

What are the ideals, the notions of being part of the Singapore Neighbourhood, its virtues, the civic values that define life in the heartlands? Do we know what these are? What are the non-threatening, friendship-based ways in which we develop these shared values?

Is it an exclusive set of traits, or can it extend itself to include the Myanmarese, the Bangladeshi, the Australian, the foreign national in our midst? Is it impossible for them "to speak our lingo", to adopt some of our norms like putting litter in the bin, and are we even all there yet. (The majority of those hauled up for littering are Singaporeans, and let us not split hairs over whether they are new or old Singaporeans.)

I recently noticed a photograph of auxiliary police standing over foreign workers accompanying a story that Cisco and Aetos guards have now been contracted to counsel and ensure that foreign workers do not foul up our estates or the other places that they like to congregate. I wondered if they will go away thinking that Singapore is a police state.

While that is at the level of transients and perhaps there are fewer who would want to invest time in befriending them, we know as citizens that we also prefer living in a place where we do not have to run into the law too often.

After all, a common grouse of life in Singapore is that we are too highly-regulated.

It does mean that we do not ask the Government to step in to structure so much of what should be our civic life that it crowds out any ground-up, authentic definition of who we are and what we are about.

We have to care and we have to take the time.

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