

Changing perception on inflow of foreigners

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IPS senior research fellow Leong Chan-Hoong says integration activities for locals and foreigners are helpful, but the environments shouldn't be artificial – the interactions need to be more casual and spontaneous.

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The White Paper issued this week projects a population of up to 6.9 million here by 2030, with citizens making up 55 per cent of all people here. The Government expects to take in 15,000 to 25,000 new citizens and 30,000 permanent residents a year. Dr Leong Chan-Hoong, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) who was vice-chairman of the 2010 Reach Policy Study Workgroup on integration, speaks to Leonard Lim about the challenges ahead.

What are your thoughts on the figures?

It's important to analyse the breakdown more carefully: 1996, that's the first time we crossed the 30,000 mark for new permanent residents (PRs).

For eight, nine years, we had more than 30,000 PRs a year. When we first crossed that threshold, it was said that with so many PRs and immigrants, it would create social disruption and tension, but that didn't happen. It was only in recent years that we see a lot more of that. If you just look at the PR and new citizen component, those figures are sustainable, they are realistic.

However, the other component that needs more in-depth discussion is the number of non-residents. It has steadily increased over the last 15 years, and if you project to 2030, it will go up even higher. In 2000, we had about 750,000 non-residents. In 2010, 1.5 million - it doubled. In 2030, 2.5 million. It will increase from the current 25 per cent to 36 per cent of the total population. But there's very little discussion on this component.

It would be good if policymakers could provide more clarity and detail on these 2.5 million, their profiles, which countries they are from, their skill sets, how do we accommodate them - in dormitories, through the rental market? When we hit the 2.5

million mark in 2030, what will happen next? Will the proportion of non-residents increase beyond 36 per cent? Personally, I am worried if this will dilute the Singaporean core.

Some have expressed similar concerns. Do you see social tensions ahead?

I don't think Singaporeans are xenophobic now. I think they are by and large inclusive. If there's any resentment it's not directed at foreigners, but the foreigner policy.

Forty per cent of all marriages involve someone of a different nationality. At the turn of every corner, you're bound to see a foreigner serving you, in a restaurant, a petrol kiosk or a sales counter. If the relations between Singaporeans and foreigners are really that antagonistic, people will be unhappy from the time they wake up to the time they sleep.

In our research, we find that Singaporeans by and large appreciate foreigners' contributions, but at the same time express concern that some of the foreigners may or may not be committed to Singapore.

What are your thoughts on integration efforts so far? What would you suggest can be done to improve social cohesion?

So far, what we've tried to do is "deficit management". We try to patch up the gaps between locals and foreigners by having more social programmes, activities to bring the two groups together. At one level that is helpful. But at the other end, we probably need to go beyond this and talk about spontaneous shared experiences - things that people do together without planning, and regardless if it involves joy, pain, or anxiety.

Grassroots integration carnivals and activities can bring people from different nationalities and races together, but these are very controlled, artificial environments. It's important that the social interactions be done in a more day-to-day and casual fashion.

It is also important that we don't target certain groups - immigrants from certain countries - as it becomes very contrived. Say, for a Chinese New Year gathering for everyone in the block, invite everyone. Don't spell it out in black and white that this is for integration.

Second, currently, children of expatriates or PRs can now study in local international schools. They will not have common shared experiences from socialising with Singaporean kids in the national schools. They will not get the opportunities to mingle with heartlanders.

Is it possible to make it mandatory for second-generation PRs, that if they want to be PRs, they have to go through mainstream schools, as opposed to allowing them to enrol in international schools?

Third, national service. There's the perception that this is an inequitable policy which is biased in favour of foreigners. For second-generation PRs, they have the option of

giving up permanent residency before enlistment, there's an escape clause. For Singaporeans, there's no option out.

Also, can the Government do less in all this? A lot of the integration now is driven from the top down. Can we decentralise it, make it citizen-driven? Perhaps get schools and companies to do such things on their own, take responsibility to see that foreigners are inducted well rather than relying on the Government.

Some academics suggested an "immigration bonus", given only to Singaporeans from levies collected from work permit and SPass holders. Would this work?

I'm not in favour of an immigration bonus, it should not be transactional. It should be about the emotive connection. Going back to national service, it is probably one of the few institutions that bring people together, and is a social leveller. It's the perfect embodiment of equity.

In recent studies conducted by the Reach policy study workgroup and IPS, NS emerged as a key bugbear in the foreign-local divide. The Ministry of Defence revealed that one-third of NS-liable 18-year-old PRs chose not to fulfil their obligations, and gave up their residency.

Can NS be tweaked? Make it mandatory for children of PRs to serve NS, and make their parents put up a security bond that will be forfeited if their kids do not serve NS. Maybe the parents could also be made to give up their PR status if that happens, though that might be too draconian. But this is the elephant in the room.

The Government has defended the need for foreigners, saying they are necessary to keep the economy humming and provide good jobs for Singaporeans. But this seems to not sway many. What would you suggest?

It's divisive now, as people see this as part of the political divide. Some feel that the Government is not on the side of Singaporeans in all of these.

If you want to change that perception, then you've to think harder on how that message is to be brought to Singaporeans.

If policymakers want to make an impact, it might be more effective if they enlist people with different political inclinations. If this population issue matters to everybody, it ought to be something to be tackled collectively.