

Reflections on immigration

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ONE of the major themes of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's National Day Rally speech on Sunday is immigration.

PM Lee explained the imperative for Singapore to welcome immigrants, in order to make up for the deficit resulting from our low fertility and in order to benefit from the brain power and cultural diversity which the highly educated and talented migrants bring with them. The PM called upon Singaporeans to be bighearted in welcoming them. He also called upon the migrants to make greater efforts to integrate into Singapore. I have three reflections on the subject of immigration and integration.

First, I wish to remind ourselves that we are an immigrant nation. With few exceptions, most of us are the descendants of immigrants who have settled here from other parts of Asia and the wider world. My grandfather left his home district of Tong An, in China's Fujian province, because of anarchy, poverty and the lack of opportunity. My mother was a first-generation immigrant from Shanghai. On my father's side, I am therefore a third-generation Singaporean. On my mother's side, I am a second-generation Singaporean.

I believe that my family's history is typical of many Singapore families. Since we are almost all the descendants of immigrants, it would be a betrayal of our history if we were to become anti-immigrants or anti-foreigners.

I am optimistic that we will not become such a people. I believe that Singaporeans are generally openhearted and broad-minded. We are one of the least xenophobic people in the world. If, in recent years, there has been unhappiness, it is because the influx of foreigners had exceeded our absorptive capacity and strained our infrastructure and social amenities. The annual intake of foreigners has to be better calibrated and managed.

Second, Singapore has become one of the world's most attractive global cities. Many members of the global elite are coming to live and work here. We should continue to welcome them because Singapore benefits from their brain power, network and cultural diversity.

Singapore is, however, also a country. There are inherent contradictions between being a country and a global city. As a global city, we will inevitably become more unequal. I believe that it is possible to reconcile the contradictions. As a country, we have to worry about our cohesion and national unity.

We must, therefore, ensure that Singapore is a good home for our own people as well as for the global elite. We must, therefore, narrow the widening income and wealth gaps, reinforce social mobility and work harder to achieve our vision of building a "democratic society, based on justice and equality".

Third, I support the PM's exhortation to the new arrivals to try harder to assimilate. What are the values and norms of Singapore? We value integrity and the absence of corruption. We follow the law and generally observe the rules of social discipline,

such as not spitting, not littering, queueing up, addressing older Singaporeans as "uncles" and "aunties".

We treat members of other races, religions and languages with respect, as they are our brothers and sisters. We do not denigrate the religious beliefs of others. We enjoy eating one another's cuisines and celebrate our cultural diversity. We do not look down on those who are less fortunate than we are. We try to give back to society through volunteerism and philanthropy. We use English or Singlish as our connector language.

New members of the Singapore family should try to absorb the above values and norms. If they do so, I am confident that they will be warmly welcomed into the family.

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