

PRs now better educated S'pore must welcome more 'suitably qualified' immigrants: Wong

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SINGAPORE - The number of foreigners who became permanent residents (PRs) last year was half that of 2009 and one-third 2008's figure. But the approach of keeping Singapore's doors open to "suitably qualified" foreigners is here to stay.

Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng yesterday reiterated this reality as the population ages without replacing itself adequately.

With the fertility rate hitting a new low last year, Mr Wong said the Republic must keep bringing in foreign workers to support economic growth. Said Mr Wong: "The key hurdle to achieving a sustainable population lies in our local fertility rate, which is quite weak."

Mr Wong, who heads the National Population and Talent Division (NPTD), also outlined the principles that would guide the Government's objective of achieving a "sustainable population profile": Preserving and upholding what is distinctive and unique about Singapore, ensuring the growth and change will benefit Singaporeans and remaining nimble and prepared to make adjustments along the way.

Speaking at the annual Singapore Perspectives seminar, which is organised by the Institute of Policy Studies, Mr Wong disclosed that 29,265 foreigners became PRs last year, a sharp drop from 59,460 in 2009, and 79,200 in 2008.

The number of new citizens remained relatively steady at 18,758 in 2010, compared to 19,928 for 2009.

The Government had tightened the PR and citizenship framework in the last quarter of 2009 to better manage the pace and overall numbers of foreigners.

IPS research fellow Leong Chan Hoong said the figures had a "very reassuring effect for Singaporeans". Said Dr Leong: "Certainly I think this will help assure Singaporeans that the policymakers have their interests as a priority."

In his speech, Mr Wong said the Government would continue to encourage couples to have more children but he noted that raising the fertility rate would take time.

Growing the population, Mr Wong explained, provides the critical mass to attract investors and grow domestic markets.

The key is in attracting the right kind of people.

Mr Wong said: "Singapore's population story is still evolving. Looking ahead, continual refinements will need to be made at appropriate junctures to ensure that Singapore will

remain our best home. Like other countries around the world, we must continue to welcome suitably qualified people to work and live in Singapore and contribute to our society." Mr Wong described these "suitably qualified people" as an "improvement in the quality of new PRs".

According to the latest population census, PRs in Singapore tend to be better-educated.

Almost half of the PR population last year were degree holders, compared with 18 per cent of citizens.

Going forward, the NPTD will formulate, coordinate and review Government policies.

As to what is unique about Singapore, Mr Wong said that its people "value hard work, thrift and honesty" and the country has also made its multi-ethnic diversity work for it.

Mr Wong said the Government will "always be guided by the need to preserve a strong citizen core" and to "maintain stability" in the ethnic mix.