

Sharp drop in S'pore PR passes issued last year

Kenny Chee

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Following measures to tighten an influx of foreigners, the number of new permanent residents (PRs) here fell by half last year, said Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng yesterday.

The measures were part of the Government's efforts to ease tensions that have arisen from Singapore grappling with itself as a home and a global city, said Mr Wong, who is also Coordinating Minister for National Security.

He said that the measures implemented in the last quarter of 2009 to better manage the inflow and quality of new immigrants resulted in the number of new permanent-residence passes issued falling by half from 59,460 in 2009 to 29,265 last year.

He added that the Government has "observed an improvement in the quality of new PRs" and because Singapore has been able to attract new citizens of good quality, the number of new citizenships granted has "remained relatively steady".

The number of new citizenships granted fell slightly by about 6 per cent from 19,928 in 2009 to 18,758 last year.

According to figures released by the Department of Statistics last Wednesday, the proportion of PRs who are university-educated rose to 49.5 per cent last year from 32.7 per cent in 2000.

Mr Wong, who heads the National Population and Talent Division, was speaking at the Singapore Perspectives conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and held at the Raffles City Convention Centre yesterday.

Dr Leong Chan Hoong, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, told reporters that the drop in the number of new PRs last year might seem sharp, especially when compared with that of nearly 80,000 in 2008.

"But from a longer-term perspective, like a 10-year period, the drop...is not so dramatic," he said.

Mr Wong said that "not all Singaporeans are comfortable with the pace of change and developments", even though Singapore has been ranked highly as one of the top global cities.

He cited tensions that have arisen from space and land constraints, as well as a possible erosion of a sense of belonging as Singapore changes. For instance, he said, some citizens attribute problems of congestion and rising prices to foreigners.

But he said being a global city that is open helps Singapore overcome its physical constraints and small population. To ease tensions, the Government is also staying “nimble” to make changes when needed, like tightening immigration.

Mr Wong also said that the Government is looking to make sure that growth and change benefit Singaporeans, while ensuring that its population strategy mitigates the impact of an ageing population.

One way is to tap on immigrants. He noted that low birth rates here is a problem, with preliminary estimates suggesting that the resident total fertility rate fell to a record low of 1.16 last year, from 1.22 in 2009.

Mr Wong said the Government was also looking at preserving and upholding distinct and unique aspects of Singapore to address the tensions stemming from making Singapore a home and global city.

The country’s character was shaped by its immigrant forefathers and Singaporeans now value hard work, thrift and honesty, he added.

“Our habits and character as a people reflect the simplicity of our roots,” he said. For instance, despite high-rise urban living, many people still have the gotong royong spirit of neighbourliness and mutual assistance, he said.

“We can be competitive, or kiasu, but we also have a strong tradition of philanthropy, volunteerism and caring for one another,” he added.

Ambassador-at-Large Ong Keng Yong told reporters that it is precisely the competitiveness of Singaporeans that makes them uneasy about foreigners here.

“Some of them feel threatened (by foreigners) because of their kiasu mentality,” he said, adding that the Government is trying to address this unease by assuring citizens that it is looking after them.