

300 new citizens give up their status each year

Amanda Tan & Tay Suan Chiang
The Straits Times, 2 March 2012

EACH year, around 300 naturalised citizens relinquish their status, Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean told Parliament on Tuesday.

They are among 1,200 Singaporeans who give up their citizenship each year.

Mr Teo, who is also Home Affairs Minister, said there is no pattern in the reasons given, which vary. Some say they prefer to live overseas, while others are marrying a foreigner or reuniting with their families in other countries.

He was responding to a question from Dr Lim Wee Kiak (Nee Soon GRC), who asked about the number of new citizens who relinquished their status, and their reasons for doing so.

Speaking to The Straits Times the next day, Dr Lim said he felt that 300 was on the 'high side'.

'Singaporeans are concerned that foreigners are using Singapore as a stepping stone, and when they find greener pastures they will leave us,' he said.

'I wanted to find out the characteristic of this group... Did they come here only for property investment, for instance? I still want to know how long their duration of stay here was.'

Nominated MP Eugene Tan agreed, saying the number is 'fairly significant' and of concern.

Dr Tan, who is also an assistant law professor at Singapore Management University, said a figure like that 'reinforces' public perception that foreigners use Singapore as a stepping stone, or treat the country like a 'hotel'.

'In deciding who to grant citizenship to, are we too lax? Also, are we doing enough to integrate them?' he asked, adding that 'we cannot assume they will seamlessly become citizens just by giving them an identity card'.

But Mr Alvin Yeo (Chua Chu Kang GRC) had a different view, saying the figure is not large, compared with the roughly 20,000 foreigners who are granted citizenship here each year.

'Maybe for those people, plans changed... You'll never get that figure to be zero,' he said.

Mr Yeo, who sits on the Government Parliamentary Committee for Home Affairs and Law, said: 'Of course we must work to be attractive, but even when people leave, it doesn't mean you're not.'

Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser from the National University of Singapore said possible reasons for new citizens leaving include 'realising that Singapore is not

where they want to spend the rest of their lives, and not feeling a sense of belonging to Singapore'.

He added: 'Finding better opportunities elsewhere is also a possibility.'

Asked if the figure should be of concern, Prof Tan said it 'suggests that these foreigners either do not take their new Singapore citizenship seriously, or they did not consider their decisions carefully before applying for citizenship'.

However, he also felt that 'it is better for Singapore that people who do not wish or cannot continue to be citizens not hold on to a membership they cannot commit themselves to'.

Meanwhile, immigration expert Leong Chan Hoong pointed out that the numbers do not include those who have permanently relocated but did not give up their Singapore citizenship.

Still, he said that regardless of whether the Singaporeans who move away are local-born or naturalised citizens, 'the number of emigrants on the whole is relatively small compared with that of other countries'.

Dr Leong said tighter immigration policies which may make it harder for people to renounce citizenship may not work.

'Making it more difficult for naturalised citizens to renounce their citizenship will not make them more rooted.'

'What we need is a social compact that is agreeable to both the local and foreign-born citizens. We need to ensure that those who take up citizenship understand their rights as citizens, their obligations to Singapore, and the norms, values and ethos practised in our society,' he said.