

A PhD's fine, but what about love and babies?

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MS JOAN Sim received some unexpected advice on love and life from former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew last night, when she asked him about social cohesiveness.

The 27-year-old, who is pursuing a doctorate in biological sciences at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), observed that Singapore had accepted a large number of foreign immigrants within a short period of time. She asked what could be done to promote a greater sense of belonging among those here.

Mr Lee said that given Singapore's fast-ageing population and extremely low fertility rate, it needs to accept a sizeable number of immigrants each year, to ensure society has enough young and economically active members.

He then cited figures from projections done by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) in an exercise due to be made public later this month.

He said: 'The Institute of Policy Studies has a grim statistic of 60,000 migrants a year to keep our people young and economically active. We can't digest that; 20,000 maybe, 25,000 then you're stretched, but certainly not 60,000.'

He called the latter figure 'politically indigestible'.

The 60,000 figure was used in one of several projected scenarios. The exercise found that if the fertility rate remains extremely low over the long term without any migrants, the resident population would decline and be extremely aged.

Mr Lee then turned the tables on Ms Sim and started gently quizzing her about her personal life, to the surprise and amusement of the audience.

He asked her age and if she was married, to which she said 'no'. He asked her when she would finish her PhD, and she said 'in two years' time'.

He then asked if she had a boyfriend, and again she said 'no'.

He then gave her some advice on why she should try to have children by the age of 35.

'After 35, the dangers of having mongoloid children, Down syndrome, in other words, a dull person, rises. So my advice is, please don't waste time. It's more important and more satisfying than your PhD but good luck to you. I hope you get your PhD and your boyfriend.'

Asked later what she thought about Mr Lee questioning her, Ms Sim said: 'I was quite shocked.'

She added: 'I found the dialogue very interesting. I agree with what he said about women getting married later, how it's unavoidable that they are postponing having babies.'