

Balancing needs of both camps

Zakir Hussain

The Straits Times, 24 October 2009

Challenge facing govt: How to favour citizens without putting off PRs

How do you - in PM Lee Hsien Loong's words - 'make the differentiation between citizens and PRs sharper over time to reflect the responsibilities and privileges of citizenship'?

That is an exercise which every ministry is now engaged in, as it reviews its suite of programmes, services, charges and fees, according to Community Development, Youth and Sports Minister Vivian Balakrishnan.

The challenge confronting the policymakers is: How do you favour the citizens without discouraging the PRs? After all, PRs contribute to the economy and pay taxes. If they feel unfairly treated, they will seek greener pastures.

When Insight canvassed for suggestions, one prevalent view was that distinctions should be made clearer in areas of public housing, health care and education.

Mr Philip Ng, 60, argues that PRs should hold their blue IC for a certain period of time, say two years, before they are allowed to buy an HDB resale flat. This would ensure that only those who are committed to sinking their roots here avail themselves of public housing, says the director of a relocation consultancy.

To MP and trade unionist Josephine Teo, any changes should be made on the basis of 'citizens get more', rather than 'PRs get less'.

She suggests that the grant for Singaporeans buying HDB flats for the first time could perhaps be raised.

This is because while PRs do not qualify for housing subsidies, their growing numbers have made Singaporeans feel the need to compete with them in the resale market.

Mrs Teo, who chairs the Government Parliamentary Committee for Education, also feels citizens should have more priority in primary school admission. Currently, they have the same priority as PRs, although they enjoy subsidies that PRs do not receive - such as Edusave accounts.

According to Dr Leong Chan Hoong of the Institute of Policy Studies, a more convincing way to show that Singaporeans come first is to impose a quota on the proportion of PRs entering local tertiary institutions.

'PRs pay just 10 per cent more than citizens for university tuition fees and yet National Service is not mandatory for this category of young residents,' he says.

As PRs now comprise 14 per cent of the resident population, a quota of 10 per cent for PRs would result in comparatively more educational opportunities going to citizens, he notes.

Singapore Management University sociologist Chung Wai Keung makes the case for more restrictions on the eligibility criteria for permanent residency and citizenship. He says that foreigners who are keen to live here and take up citizenship should be required to work here for a longer period of time before their applications are considered.

'This way, we will have applicants who know Singapore better and may have already integrated better into society. A longer waiting period can also help to sort out those who are more serious in considering staying here for good,' he says.

Logistics manager Teo Kueh Liang, 53, suggests that PRs be given a timeframe of say, five years, to decide whether they want to take up citizenship, failing which their status would not be renewed.

Overseas Singaporean Danny Ong, 29, is of the view that distinctions between citizens and PRs in Singapore could be packaged differently. He thinks citizens may not be aware that PRs do not share their benefits and privileges, which is not always the case elsewhere.

In his view, privileges could also be made more tangible in the form of citizens-only rebates rather than just direct subsidies for education and health care. When citizens see the value of these items, they may be more appreciative.

Striking a cautionary note, Mrs Teo says that the review should not go overboard and result in making PRs feel unwelcome. 'That would not be helpful to assimilation and social harmony, and if the extent to which they are integrated lessens, we will all be the poorer for it.'