

Foreign Workers: Many Still Feel Issue can be Handled Better

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THE foreign worker influx remains a lingering source of unhappiness among Singaporeans.

A Straits Times survey of 500 citizens shows that among seven national issues, whether the Government has improved its handling of these workers and immigrants since 2011 sits at the bottom of the list.

The State did better on issues such as the elderly, health care and housing. But just as one-quarter feels the handling of these foreigners has got worse since 2011, one-quarter believes the opposite, that this group has been handled better. Half feel there is no change.

On the other hand, at least three in five say the Government's handling of other national issues - except transport - has improved.

In the 2011 General Election, the foreign worker influx and the strain it placed on infrastructure were attacked by opposition parties as a sign of the People's Action Party government's lack of foresight.

The release of the Population White Paper last year also led to much public angst over erosion of the Singaporean core.

The survey shows fewer than two in five are confident in Singapore's future on the issue of foreign workforce and immigration; 22 per cent are not confident. People aged 21 to 24 and those older than 64 are, however, more confident. On the other hand, middle-aged Singaporeans and the lower to lower-middle income group - those earning up to \$4,000 a month - are less confident.

One surprise is that people see the foreign worker issue as less important than other national issues. Just 57 per cent say it was important to them when they voted in 2011, compared with 91 per cent who found the elderly and housing important.

Associate Professor Tan Soo Juan of the National University of Singapore said the finding does not mean people do not care about the foreign worker issue. It is, however, less immediate and personal than concerns such as the elderly, housing and health care, which cut closer to the core of one's personal well-being and family.

A survey she and Dr Siok Kuan Tambyah did in 2011 showed almost two-thirds of 1,500 citizens want the Government to restrict the foreign worker inflow to protect locals' interests. But stacked against other areas where people want the Government to do more, the foreign worker issue is at the bottom. Top priorities: ageing population and health care.

Dr Leong Chan Hoong of the Institute of Policy Studies said the ST survey is consistent with other data in indicating that people's resentment is targeted at foreign worker policies, not the foreigners themselves.

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