Lack of Immigrants will Hurt S'poreans in future

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THE turning point of the unhappiness over the influx of foreigners will be reached when Singaporeans find themselves 'hurt' by a lack of immigrants, said former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew yesterday.

But that moment will probably only come in 20 or 30 years, he said, when there are not enough young people to shoulder the economic burden of the elderly.

'People now in their 20s and 30s, it's going to be like that for them for a long time, but suddenly they will find that they are in their late 50s and 60s, and they need more medical care, more home nursing - and where are the nurses, the paramedics and the doctors?'

Although the intellectual argument on immigrants has been explained, '(people) just do not want to see so many foreigners in their midst', he said.

'They feel, no, no, won't happen in my lifetime, so let's put it off and I think it'll be put off until such time that they get older and they need the doctors, the nurses, the paramedics and the people to work the economy to pay for it.'

Speaking during a dialogue at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, Mr Lee was replying to a question on how the dismal 1.15 birth rate can be managed.

He denied that the 'Stop at Two' campaign that the Government launched in 1960s had anything to do with the situation today. Rather, economic development and rising education levels among women are the causes.

He said that he does not see the birth rate going back up because the only way is to 'dis-educate' women, and this would cause the economy to suffer.

He noted that an Institute of Policy Studies report, released last Wednesday, calculated that 'the replacement rate would mean an input of 60,000 immigrants a year'.

However, Singaporeans can currently 'digest' only about 20,000 a year, he said.

Despite his conviction that a turning point will come, he lamented that it may come too late.

'We must have (immigrants) now, to come in when they're young,' he said.