

Minding the gap between THE PINK & THE BLUE

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The Government is reviewing the distinctions between citizens and permanent residents. What prompted it? Has the line been blurred? Can the differences be calibrated to favour citizens without discouraging PRs? Insight examines an issue that crops up at almost every public forum.

If you are a Singapore citizen, you have the right to vote, visit 150 countries without a visa on your red passport, and receive a slew of tax reliefs and a cornucopia of subsidies.

If you are so inclined, you can form a political party, launch a tirade and stage a protest at Speakers' Corner on most matters - but race and religion are off-limits.

Indeed, from the cradle - or from the point you are given a pink IC - to the sick bed, you have a leg up over permanent residents (PRs) and foreigners working or living here. (see graphic: From cradle to sickbed)

Should you have the misfortune of becoming destitute or unable to support yourself, you would qualify for public assistance, ComCare aid, a rental flat and handouts to help pay your utility bills and conservancy charges. And if you fall ill, you can bank on Medifund to pay for your hospital bills.

The distinctions between citizens and PRs could not have been clearer.

As the National Population Secretariat (NPS) under the Prime Minister's Office declares unequivocally: 'Our citizens' interests are the priority of the Government.'

As it points out, a PR holds an entry permit, which is issued under the Immigration Act that grants him or her the right to enter and remain in Singapore.

'Citizenship is a birthright for legitimate children of Singapore citizen parents. As such, citizens enjoy more rights and benefits than PRs,' said the NPS.

Yet, with all these perks and privileges, many Singaporeans still complain about being marginalised by the influx of new arrivals and becoming strangers in their own land. They say they see no difference between the benefits enjoyed by citizens and PRs.

To allay these concerns, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong told 1,500 students at a Nanyang Technological University forum last month that there will be a sharper differentiation in the way citizens and PRs are treated 'to reflect the responsibilities and privileges of citizenship'.

Elaborating a day later, Community Development, Youth and Sports Minister Vivian Balakrishnan said: 'We are looking at this whole issue of calibrating the differences, so Singaporeans can see in concrete terms what it means to come first.'

'Foreigners in our midst will still feel a sense of welcome, but they must understand that they cannot demand the same privileges that come with membership. This is something we have to keep calibrating with time.'

So what is contributing to the growing groundswell of discontent and disquiet among Singaporeans? Why the need to review the distinctions between citizens and PRs for the second time since 2006? What more can be done to reassure citizens that they still bask in the Singapore sun?

The numbers game

It all has to do with the numbers, according to observers. One indisputable factor that causes many Singaporeans to feel that the privilege of citizenship has diminished, even when it has not in reality, is the significant rise in the proportion of PRs to citizens.

In 1990, there was one PR for every 23 citizens, but in 2000 this narrowed to one PR for every 10 citizens. This year, there is one PR for every six citizens.

Statistics released last month show Singapore's population nearing the five million mark, with citizens numbering 3.2 million, or 64 per cent of the total.

As of June this year, the number of PRs rose by 11 per cent over the previous year to hit a record high of 533,000. Other foreigners numbered 1.25 million.

Much of the inflow is driven by economic necessity. In his book *Population Of Singapore*, demographer Saw Swee Hock concluded that if no new citizens or PRs are admitted and fertility rates remain constantly low, a resident population of 3.6 million in 2010 will start to decline from 2020. It would fall to 3.52 million in 2030, 3.23 million in 2040, and 2.86 million in 2050.

Despite this stark reality, notes Dr Leong Chan Hoong, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), the large number of new PRs and the drive to attract foreign talent 'has created the impression that the Government is giving away permanent residency too easily'.

He identifies three other factors that have contributed to citizens' unease about new arrivals.

One is the more intense competition for resources and opportunities - especially in housing, education and the job market - from this large influx of newcomers. Although this is not peculiar to Singapore, it has been exacerbated by the recent economic downturn.

Two, male citizens shoulder the responsibility of two years of national service followed by 10 years of annual reservist liabilities, while their PR counterparts have no such obligations.

Three, the lack of effective integration among some PRs has led to the stereotypical view that such residents are 'fair-weather friends' who have little intention to contribute to or engage with the community.

Sociologist Paulin Straughan, who is also a Nominated MP, feels that Singapore's dense geographic space makes it inevitable that, with the rising number of non-citizens, citizens end up interacting much more with them.

'There are bound to be more reactions, both positive and negative, and it is a pity we have not been able to highlight the positive exchanges,' she tells Insight.

It is hard to measure the intensity of negative reactions, but a recent incident is reflective of the level of emotion the subject can stir up. A TV clip from China was circulated online, which depicted Singapore PR Zhang Yuan Yuan, 28, as an overseas China national who returned home to take part in her country's national day parade. She came to Singapore in 2003, lived here for five years, and became a PR in 2006.

Irate netizens questioned her allegiance to Singapore and seized the opportunity to vent their spleen against PRs. Her defenders, however, pointed out that Ms Zhang was entitled to be loyal to China as its citizen.

The NPS noted then that PRs are not citizens and it is up to them to become naturalised. 'It's not realistic to expect PRs to have the same level of commitment as citizens. They're likely to retain ties with their countries of origin, just as we would like our overseas Singaporeans to retain ties with Singapore,' said its spokesman.

Rights not enough

Another reason Singaporeans feel hot and bothered over the citizenship issue is the perception that they do not have any rights that are uniquely theirs, and that PRs seem to have the same rights but without the attendant responsibilities and obligations.

IPS' Dr Leong finds that in absolute and quantifiable terms, the amount of privileges and rights for citizens versus PRs remains highly favourable for Singapore citizens.

He notes that there was little distinction in benefits between the two categories before policy changes in 2007.

That year, the hospital subsidy PRs enjoyed was reduced by five percentage points. Last year, it was reduced by a further five percentage points.

Hospital subsidies for foreign workers, previously the same as for citizens, were also slashed to zero.

Tertiary education fees for PRs and foreigners were raised.

Yet, some people argue that tossing up all these hard facts does not quite address the wider concerns and worries of citizens who feel they have few special rights as one.

In a 1950 essay on citizenship that continues to be widely cited, British sociologist T.H. Marshall noted that citizenship confers on a citizen three kinds of rights.

The first is civil rights such as the right to free speech, to own property, to freedom of religion and to equality before the law.

The second is political rights such as the right to vote and to stand for office.

The third is social rights such as the right to education, housing and protection against poverty.

To public law expert Kevin Tan, Singaporeans have some grounds when they feel they do not have enough of these rights due to them as citizens.

'If you say you are a citizen, the most blatant right is the right to vote, but because of the GRC system, there are a large number of Singaporeans who have never voted in their life. As a result, they do not feel they are citizens in the political sense,' he says.

Associate Professor Straughan adds that many Singaporeans have not had the opportunity to exercise the right to vote because of the lack of opposition.

'If you actively voted a government in, it will be in your vested interest to support that government and ensure that the governance will be a success. But if you did not exercise that right, there is a high likelihood that you may end up just watching from the sidelines and throwing in criticisms whenever you deem appropriate,' she says.

She believes there is a greater need for the Government to engage voters, and hopes concerned citizens will likewise take advantage of the available platforms to engage the Government.

Dr Tan acknowledges that citizens have some exclusive rights, such as the right to speak freely at Speakers' Corner, but says these are not tangible enough. Political leaders have maintained repeatedly that politics remains the preserve of citizens.

'If citizens can stage protests, without a permit, everywhere, that is something else,' he says. 'If you feel you are empowered, then you are more likely to feel this country belongs to you.'

As for social rights, there is a growing perception that PRs enjoy many of the same rights citizens have, albeit with restrictions.

These include the right to live in subsidised HDB housing, even if PRs can buy only resale flats, and the right to significant subsidies in areas like education.

Dr Tan believes that citizens are clamouring for more rights because they feel hard done by policies that entitle PRs to a slice of the benefits they receive as citizens - and they feel these privileges make life harder for Singaporeans as a result.

Many new PRs tend to be mid-career professionals who join the middle class and upper-middle class. So when they clinch their pink IC, they would receive about the same benefits as born-and-bred citizens, even though the latter have gone through national service and paid a lifetime of taxes.

Observers, however, reject a differentiation between various groups of citizens, as this would create a category of 'second-class citizens'. As Prof Straughan puts it: 'A democracy will protect every citizen equally.'

Tough global competition

Although the Prime Minister spoke of having more distinctions between citizens and PRs, he said that the Government 'cannot make it so onerous for PRs and non-residents that they do not want to come'.

Singapore's immigration policy is unequivocal about seeking talented migrants who can help grow the economy and augment the quality of its citizens.

Citizens do have a headstart in the 120,000-strong public service, where non-Singaporeans account for 7 per cent of the workforce.

Make citizenship more appealing to PRs

The Public Service Division tells Insight that these PRs and foreigners are employed where special skills are needed - such as language competency, as well as for roles that require technical and other competencies which Singaporeans may be short of.

But elsewhere, it is no surprise that citizens feel the heat of the competition - whether in schools, universities or the workforce - as they have to put in more effort to do well.

In the view of Singapore Management University sociologist Chung Wai Keung, one way to allay discontent is to stress that while Singapore welcomes foreigners to work here to keep the economy competitive, Singaporeans should be given priority, based on meritocracy.

This means that if a Singaporean and a foreigner have similar qualifications, the job - or university spot - should go to the Singaporean first.

But what if the foreigners coming in are far better-qualified?

Government ministers have explained that it is better to have the top talents here to compete with Singaporeans, and help Team Singapore stay ahead, as otherwise such minds would just go elsewhere and compete against Singaporeans.

However, international projects coordinator Danny Ong, 29, admits that this reality can be tough to stomach. His experience illustrates both sides of the coin.

Nine years ago, he failed to clinch a place in a local university despite several appeals, and felt resentful that Singapore favoured the foreign talents who were taking his university place.

Mr Ong managed to secure a place to read psychology and business management at Monash University in Melbourne, and his family dipped into their savings to help him pay his way through. He worked part-time while studying, and recently received an Australian government scholarship.

'It took me almost eight years overseas to finally understand that privileges, even though they are given to citizens, should be earned and respected,' says the overseas Singaporean who lives in Melbourne and is now an Australian PR.

'I have every right to enter a local university, but I never looked at myself and ask why did I not study hard enough to secure a place in a local university in the first place?'

Given the universal Singapore aspiration for a degree, policymakers will have to think how they can keep universities here competitive and attractive to talent from all over the world, even as they seek to satisfy citizens' wishes for a university spot.

Global city or country?

Most major cities around the world today have large populations that are not born in the country. Take New York, where 40 per cent of the population is not born in the United States. A similar ratio applies here.

But the key difference, explains sociologist Sharon Siddique, is that Singapore is both a city and a nation.

Many see this place as one or the other. The fundamental issue for Dr Siddique is whether an individual considers Singapore as a nation, or just a city.

'For those who follow the 'Singapore is my country' route, the identity, perks, and obligations of citizenship are vital. For those who consider Singapore primarily as a city, the freedom to leave, to move on, to see this as one place on a global cosmopolitan continuum, will prevail, whatever passport one carries,' she says.

'We should never forget that Singapore as a city and country is an anomaly. Perhaps our policymakers need to reflect more carefully on this.'

For Prof Straughan, the focus should remain on growing the pie even larger - as both a global city and as a country - so that there is enough to satisfy everyone.

At the end of the day, the effort to reassure citizens and entice PRs must pitch citizenship in a broader perspective.

As Mr Danny Ong tells Insight: 'In a globalised world, locals from anywhere can live overseas and yet create mutual benefits for their home and host countries.'

The challenge for Singapore, as it re-calibrates the distinctions between citizens and PRs, is that a matter like winning more new citizens cannot be all about material inducements.

PRs must continue to feel they have a place here, as they would otherwise leave for more welcoming shores, to Singapore's loss.

But citizenship has to also appeal to them, just as it has to mean more to those born-and-bred here, beyond the bread-and-butter concerns and monetary advantages.

As Prof Straughan sums it up:

'Being Singaporean means membership in a sovereign state that is socially, politically and economically stable and secure, where people from different races can live together in harmony, and where our respective religions can be practised openly.

'More importantly, being Singaporean also means we can rely on a government that is free from corruption and where national policies are sensible and apt.'

'If we continue to advance Singapore as a city state where you can raise your family in a wholesome, vibrant city governed by efficient and honest policymakers, with a world-class education and health-care system, and where basic needs of citizens are met, I think that would elevate the prestige of Singapore citizenship.'