

MM 'not quite sold' on idea of 6.5m population

He projects optimum size of 5.5m to preserve open spaces and sense of comfort

Li Xueying

The Straits Times, 2 February 2008

MINISTER Mentor Lee Kuan Yew 'has not quite been sold' on the idea of a 6.5 million population size in Singapore.

Instead, he projects for Singapore an optimum population size of five to 5.5 million for Singapore.

He said yesterday: 'I have not quite been sold on the idea that we should have 6.5 million.'

'I think there's an optimum size for the land that we have, to preserve the open spaces and the sense of comfort.'

Mr Lee was speaking at think-tank Institute of Policy Studies' conference 'Scenarios for the Next Generation' which seeks to gaze into the crystal ball and discuss what Singapore will look like come 2030.

Speakers, including Cabinet ministers, academics and journalists, held forth on subjects such as how the economy should evolve, cultural trends, and the Singapore identity.

Over an hour-long dialogue with some 900 participants, MM Lee touched on issues ranging from whether Singapore has the talent pool to sustain a two-party political system to the widening income divide.

One question, posed by the moderator, diplomat Tommy Koh, was whether Singapore is guilty of overbuilding.

A year ago, the Government had announced that it is making plans to accommodate a population of 6.5 million people - up from the current 4.5 million - in the next 40 to 50 years.

This sparked off worries about overcrowding.

Speaking yesterday, Mr Lee said he does not believe that Singapore should go the way of Hong Kong - 'just solid buildings, one blocking the sunlight of the other'.

The Chinese territory has a population of about seven million.

But while Hong Kong had no choice because it is 'as they put it so aptly, a borrowed place on borrowed time', Singapore does, Mr Lee said.

'We are building on freehold and we are owners, we are sovereign. Therefore, my projection would be for somewhere around five to 5.5 million.'

Coupled with further reclamation, Singapore can then retain its space, the greenery, and 'the sense of not being cramped, our parks, our connectors, our park connectors, birds, trees, water, canals into streams and so on'.

This is key to how Singapore can be unique, he stressed.

'What we have done with the Singapore River and the Kallang River from two sewers into recreational areas, we must do with every canal in Singapore. And it will be done within the next 10 years,' he promised.

This, he added, does not go with 'a terrific density of population'.