

National service for permanent residents

Forging bonds of brotherhood

William Choong

The Straits Times, 2 June 2012

AN INTERESTING statistic popped up from a recent Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) survey of local- and foreign-born citizens.

Sixty-nine per cent of the locals polled said having a male child who has completed National Service (NS) is an important characteristic of being 'Singaporean'. But only 43 per cent of the foreign-born citizens said the same.

The figures highlight one thing: after 45 years of National Service, most Singaporeans rate the value of NS highly.

This is cause for celebration: The Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) has become as much an instrument of social integration as it is a war-fighting entity.

Indeed, NS has become a great leveller, and proof that the Singapore Pledge is operative. Regardless of race, language and religion, all NS-liable men serve together.

As the young Dylan McDermott, acting as a war-weary sergeant in the Vietnam-era movie *Hamburger Hill*, said: 'All I want from anybody is to get their ass in the grass with the rest of us.'

The upshot of this is straightforward: If foreign-born citizens are less supportive of NS as being a quintessential Singaporean trait, they need to get used to it.

A more sensitive issue, however, is the perceived difference between citizens and permanent residents (PRs) when it comes to NS.

On the face of it, not much separates citizens and PRs when it comes to NS. It is mandatory for citizens and second-generation PRs to serve full-time national service for about two years from age 18. (First-generation PRs are 'administratively exempted').

NS-liable PRs are second-generation PRs. If they fail to register or enlist, they are deemed NS defaulters like any other citizen who defaults on NS. If convicted, they face a jail term of up to three years and/or a fine of up to \$10,000.

But some PRs choose to renounce their PR status rather than do NS. Those who do so without serving NS face 'adverse consequences', says Mindef.

It is this escape hatch of being able to renounce one's PR status that is a cause of some resentment among locals, says Dr Leong Chan-Hoong, an IPS senior research fellow who spearheaded the think-tank's survey.

So the term 'adverse consequences' needs clarification and assurance that it is a sufficient deterrent.

Last November, Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen said that about a third of male foreigners who became PRs under the sponsorship of their parents renounced their PR status prior to serving NS.

These PRs - some 4,200 people - were warned about the consequences of their action at the point of renouncing their PR status. 'Their failure to serve NS will be taken into account when they subsequently apply to study or work in Singapore,' said Dr Ng.

It is generally understood that 'adverse consequences' refer to the difficulty associated with getting one's PR status back or obtaining a work visa to work in Singapore.

But Mindef has not explicitly spelt out what the 'adverse consequences' are. For instance, will a former PR who renounced his PR status to avoid NS but is highly skilled, still be able to obtain an Employment Pass? Or is there a blanket ban on such people getting a work visa in Singapore?

Writing to the press in December, Mr Sreedharan Sechachalam said he knew of renouncers who got into the National University of Singapore's 'highly competitive medical school to which, every year, some straight-As Singaporean students fail to gain admission'. He added that some renouncers were even admitted to speciality training programmes sought after by many Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans.

Mindef replied to Mr Sechachalam's letter, without addressing the specific cases but repeating the same premises regarding renouncers: they will face 'adverse consequences' and their failure to serve NS would be taken into account when they subsequently apply to work or study here.

To alleviate some of the resentment Singaporeans feel over this issue, two suggestions have surfaced. First, a security bond should be considered.

Writing in these pages last month, Dr Leong proposed that parents be required to put up a security bond when applying for PR status for their children.

This would be similar to the security bond posted for NS-liable pre-enlistees (citizens and PRs) who go overseas for extended periods. The bond is forfeited if these young men do not return to fulfil NS obligations.

Given that second-generation PRs are not yet citizens, the bond put up by first-generation PRs who apply for residency status for their children could be pegged lower than that for citizens. This bond should, likewise, be forfeited if the male child fails to do his NS stint. Dr Leong adds that the child should also have to give up his PR status.

A second suggestion is that NS-liable PRs be subject to the same rules as citizens who renounce their citizenship - that is, they cannot renounce their residency until they have served NS.

The two measures are reasonable, given that NS-liable PRs have, like citizens, enjoyed the benefits of living in Singapore.

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser supports both ideas. The issue is as much about integration as fairness, he says, adding: 'Citizens want to be fairly treated. If young PRs have enjoyed the key privileges accorded to citizens, Singaporeans expect them to share in the responsibilities of citizenship as well.'

Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean told Parliament in 2006 that NS-liable PRs are 'like Singaporeans in many ways' as they had studied alongside their Singaporean counterparts and benefited from living in Singapore.

It is true the two measures mooted will discourage some potential PRs from rooting themselves firmly here. If so, their fledging roots never went very deep in the first place. More pertinently, the measures will go some way towards alleviating some of the unhappiness about PRs and NS. In his 2006 Parliament speech, DPM Teo stressed two enduring principles about NS: It is universal, meaning all young and fit Singaporean males will have to serve NS; and it is equitable, meaning everyone will be treated equally. If NS is a fellowship forged among a band of brothers from a shared crucible, these two hallowed principles should apply to both citizens and NS-liable PRs.