

## **Population growth 'not at expense of quality of life'**

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GROWTH - whether in the population or economy - is not to be feared but should be prepared for, four ministers took pains to assure Singaporeans yesterday.

They were speaking at a dialogue where the audience raised concerns ranging from why Singapore was preparing for a 6.5 million population, to why a galloping economy was such a high priority.

Mr Christophe Inglin, chairman of Sustainable Energy Association of Singapore's renewable energy panel, pointed out that many developed countries were content with 1 to 3 per cent growth rates.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Lim Swee Say said that growth cannot be artificially controlled.

What the Government is doing is to create an optimum climate for investors to sink their roots, from ensuring enough land to talent, and allow the growth process to take on a life of its own.

In fact, its worry is not that Singapore is growing too fast but that the future will be tough and Singapore would stagnate.

Added Foreign Minister George Yeo: 'When a child is growing, you feed it. One day it will stop growing, and one day there will be other problems. But when it is growing, don't stunt it.'

This policy of growth was to ensure that Singapore can compete in the constellation of cities of the future that includes Mumbai and Shanghai, he said.

The two were among four Singapore ministers taking part in a dialogue at the Institute of Policy Studies conference on Singapore's future. Also present were Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan and Minister for the Environment and Water Resources Yaacob Ibrahim.

The ministers acknowledged that concerns remained over whether Singapore could support 6.5 million people, which planners here are catering for in the next 40 to 50 years.

In an earlier session, Associate Professor Lye Lin Heng, deputy director of the National University of Singapore's Asia-Pacific Centre for Environmental Law, had asked: 'Do we really need an influx of population to make life better for us? Or is it adding to the stress of our children and future generations?'

Mr Lim underscored the necessity of bulking up during the dialogue at the end of the conference.

He said importing foreign talent was necessary to supplement the labour pool, even as the skills of the existing 4.8 million population was being upgraded.

'Even if you were to educate every Singaporean, retrain every older Singaporean, at the end of the day, you must still recognise there is a limit,' he said.

The need to import foreigners was also raised by demographers G. Shantakumar and Yap Mui Teng.

But they acknowledged it would not be the silver bullet that would arrest the decline in Singapore's working population.

In fact, by 2030, even an improved fertility rate and 100,000 immigrants a year would not help Singapore keep its current 72 per cent employment rate among the resident population here, said Dr Yap.

Mr Khaw and Dr Yaacob assured Singaporeans that they would find ways to ensure growth would not be at the expense of their health care, or their environment.

Said Mr Khaw: 'Although Singapore is a little red dot, if you plan properly, you can still enjoy the same quality of life. But if you just leave things to chance, just develop randomly, then even 3.5 million may create difficulties.'

Dr Yaacob added: 'If we need a certain quantum of people... then we jolly well must find a way to maintain that population, within the same standard of living that we are used to.'

