

Singaporeans take time to warm to new citizens

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New immigrants at integration forum say locals tend to be reserved but are open to forming close ties

Singaporean reserve was a subject of discussion at a conference on integration yesterday, with new immigrants saying locals do not tend to reach out to newcomers but are open to forming close ties once they have warmed up.

Former Belgian citizen Alain Vandendorpe, who became a Singapore citizen in 2002, suggested at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) conference that new immigrants should make the first move.

"When you move to a country, you have to be gracious and understand that you are being hosted by the country... we have to take some extra steps to integrate ourselves into the society here," he said.

IPS director Janadas Devan said the conference was held to get people talking about the problems of integration which, if not dealt with, could result in Singapore heading the way of some Western countries which have seen a growth in nationalistic politics.

"The fastest-growing political party in every one of the Scandinavian countries now is a fascist party, a neo-nazi party," said Mr Janadas. He hopes it will not happen here but said there are no guarantees.

In the lead-up to the conference, IPS held four closed-door dialogues with more than 40 leaders of new immigrant associations and local community bodies in April and May.

At these sessions, the new immigrants said they were drawn to Singapore's quality of life and political stability, but found the city state too competitive and Westernised, with little emphasis on culture and history.

Presenting a summary of the closed-door dialogues, IPS researcher Mathew Matthews said: "Not everybody, before they came here, is used to the fact that there is so much multiculturalism, where there are many languages, several races and many religions."

About 100 people attended yesterday's conference at the Orchard Hotel, including members of new immigrant associations, local groups and government officials.

While some agreed that foreign children who attend local schools are better integrated, a handful said expatriates might not choose to do so as they have to prepare for the day when their contracts end and they have to leave Singapore.

The participants also discussed the role of new immigrant groups, with Mr Danish Sultan, president of the Singapore Pakistani Association, asking if such groups hinder integration by creating comfort zones for new immigrants.

But Mr Vincent Schoon, board member of racial harmony advocacy group OnePeople.sg, disagreed. He said: "If we decide to stop all the various associations that deal with racial and religious harmony and the integration process, it will fail completely and we will be setting ourselves back 20 to 30 years."

To get Singaporeans warming up to foreigners, sociologist Tan Ern Ser said that locals have to feel secure. "It is not that we are opposed to competition, we are more opposed to unfair competition, or what we perceived to be unfair competition."

Mr Wang Xin Bin, executive committee member of Hua Yuan General Association of New Immigrants from China, agreed. He supported the recent moves by the Manpower Ministry to coax employers to consider Singaporeans fairly for jobs.

Several participants told The Sunday Times that they found the frank discussions useful.

"It is always good to hear other groups' views and ideas," said Dr Ram Krishnan Gupta, vice-president of Marwari Mitra Mandal, which represents the Marwari ethnic group from the Rajasthan region of India.

IPS' Mr Janadas said the institute plans to hold more of such dialogues.

While welcoming the prospects of more dialogue, Mr Vandendorre also pleaded with locals to understand the difficulties that new immigrants face.

He revealed that his teenage son refused to speak to him for three months after he renounced his Belgian citizenship. "It is not an easy decision for someone to cross the bridge and make a decision 'I want to be part of this community'. It has consequences."