

The rocky road to future growth

The Population White Paper was a plan to secure Singapore's success, in the face of a serious demographic challenge. So what went wrong and how can things be put right?

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Somewhere along the way in the White Paper's journey from policymakers to the people, there was a breakdown in communication.

The Government's population roadmap was a year in the making. Senior politicians declared it a national priority. Ministers and civil servants spent time seeking views from the public at townhall meetings and online.

Yet when the plan was finally unveiled earlier last month, the response was overwhelmingly negative. Many were shocked to read of further plans to grow the population to reach up to 6.9 million in 2030, when so much angst had been expressed about present-day congestion.

Many like National Family Council chairman Lim Soon Hock put it down to a gap in expectations between the Government and people.

"People wanted short-term issues to be solved before addressing the longer-term challenges of our population. I do not think the Government expected such a negative reaction. It must have come as a big surprise," he said.

Even some of the Government's own MPs had serious doubts.

Holland Bukit Timah GRC MP Liang Eng Hwa tells Insight: "When I read the paper, I felt it came across as all about the numbers. There are strong reasons for the White Paper, but many MPs felt it was misunderstood. Important issues such as reducing GDP growth, and how to support an ageing population, were not adequately aired. It was a communications issue and could have been done better."

Many felt the Paper, which is meant to guide policy, was rushed through Parliament, with just two weeks between its launch and its endorsement by the House.

Nominated MP Eugene Tan, a law lecturer at the Singapore Management University, says: "It was more a case of the Government appearing to want to bulldoze its way, treating the White Paper as an imperative rather than a basis to state its case and seek buy-in."

Framing the debate

Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean, in launching the White Paper last month, said the Government is focused on growing Singapore at a sustainable level, and pledged to plan ahead so that a high quality of life can be maintained.

Still, the projected population of up to 6.9 million by 2030 rankled. Two days later, National Development Minister Khaw Boon Wan reframed the 6.9 million figure as a "worst-case scenario".

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong backed Mr Khaw, saying in a Facebook post that 6.9 million is not a target but an aggressive scenario the Government must prepare and build infrastructure for, ahead of demand.

Ministers seemed to be searching for the most convincing way to present the population roadmap.

DPM Teo took yet another approach. He presented three scenarios in Parliament - of unbridled, moderate and zero growth. He emphasised that the Government proposed to take the middle path.

The White Paper outlines the serious demographic challenge facing Singapore as its population ages and fertility flounders at way below the replacement rate.

It recommends a slower rate of GDP growth at a range of 3 to 5 per cent to 2020, and 2 to 3 per cent from 2020 to 2030, compared to an average of above 5 per cent in recent years. The workforce would see growth of 1 to 2 per cent, down from an average of 3 per cent in the past 20 years.

Some 15,000 to 25,000 new citizens will be taken in each year to keep the population stable. The projected outcome of these policies would be a population of between 6.5 and 6.9 million by 2030 because of the uptake in new citizens and foreign workers.

These numbers were controversial from the beginning and on the second day of Parliament's five-day debate on the White Paper, Mr Liang proposed a change in the wording of the motion before the House.

The move was swiftly backed by Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Grace Fu, who oversees population matters.

Mr Liang gave Insight the back story to that amendment.

He says that at an internal PAP caucus before the debate, MPs raised concerns about key issues in the White Paper.

A group of backbenchers felt some key points needed to be put across and approached Ms Fu with the idea.

"We felt the Paper may come across too 'hard', in that it was all about numbers. We wanted to highlight the Singaporean core, and clarify the numbers. So that's how the amended motion came about."

Still, the debate struck Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy Senior Fellow Donald Low as "mechanistic and linear". He says that economics is not, and should not be, the only lens through which population policies are examined, analysed and debated.

Profound sociological questions about sense of national identity - even though mentioned by a handful of MPs in the debate - have not been adequately answered, leaving a big gap in the debate, he adds.

NMP Eugene Tan says the issues could have been better framed. "Framing was the elephant in the room. It was poorly done and that meant the Government was on the defensive from the word go."

As a result, the Government had to work hard to assure Singaporeans rather than use the debate in Parliament to mobilise people for the road ahead.

The White Paper also faced strong opposition from the Workers' Party and several Nominated MPs.

WP chairman Sylvia Lim accused the Government of getting its priorities "the wrong way around" in its quest to expand the population for the sake of economic growth.

WP proposed an alternative population projection of up to 5.8 million by 2030, and a more modest GDP growth rate of 2.5 to 3.5 per cent to 2020, and 1.5 per cent to 2.5 per cent from 2020 to 2030.

The Prime Minister sought to address many of these criticisms and concerns when he addressed the House. His speech moved many, especially when he spoke of the Singaporean identity.

PM Lee made a heartfelt promise to preserve the Singaporean core, and said the Government would never allow Singaporeans to be "overwhelmed by the sheer flood" of immigrants, even as he urged them to see things in perspective.

In full damage control mode, he also emphasised the amended motion, saying that the Paper charts the road till 2020 but there should be a review closer to that date.

He also said the population trajectory beyond 2020 has to be left to a future government and future Singaporeans to decide.

Political observers say this marked a big shift in position, with some saying the Government had to backtrack and effectively set aside its highly controversial projection of 6.9 million.

PAP's Mr Liang says PM Lee's speech, and the amended motion, assuaged Singaporeans' concerns to a certain extent.

At the end of five days of intense debate, the longest in the House in recent memory, all nine WP MPs opposed the White Paper, together with Non-Constituency MP Lina Chiam and NMPs Faizah Jamal, Laurence Lien and Janice Koh. All 77 PAP MPs present voted "yes".

The alternatives

The Government has sought to bring opposing sides together but no clear consensus has yet emerged. As WP's Ms Lim sees it, "Each model has its own assumptions, which are not universally accepted nor immutable".

She cites the Government's assumptions on old age support ratios as one point of disagreement. "I think there needs to be more discussion and study on the sustainable old age support ratio, taking into account the savings and other economic resources available, and the experience of other countries," she says.

Senior research fellow Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies notes that there seems to be "little sympathy" for workforce growth even if it has been reduced, and the political mood is sour towards immigration and business.

"The trust gap is the greatest between the public and the political opposition on one side and business on the other side. The Government is trying to bridge this but to very little effect," she says.

Beyond Parliament, the debate rages on.

Former NMP and Wings founder Kanwaljit Soin wrote in The Straits Times recently that transformational thinking is required to mobilise the elderly population to continue contributing to society. This "positive ageing" concept counters worries of an ageing population increasing the dependency ratio and raising the tax burden of the workforce.

Former urban planner Liu Thai Ker, in a commentary published this week, said Singapore should plan for population growth, local and foreign, "at as slow a pace as possible".

He tells Insight: "We must accept population growth as a reality if we want to sustain our economy. But the growth rate in the last two decades was too high. We should grow at a rate that allows us to plan for such a number while maintaining a good-quality living environment."

Other more radical ideas that have emerged include one by Austrian demography expert Wolfgang Lutz, who said at a National University of Singapore seminar this week that Singapore may be looking at its population figures through outdated lenses. He said nations should set aside 2.1 as the desired population replacement rate and urged them to look at changing conditions such as rising education levels, lower mortality rates and immigration.

On- and off-line, citizens are carrying on the debate - with some softening their stance in the aftermath.

Former NMP Viswa Sadasivan said in a letter to The Straits Times Forum Page yesterday that the Government did the right thing by forcing citizens to address the issues. "Even if key recommendations are rejected by the people, it need not be seen as a rejection of the Government but a serious call for better listening and greater accountability," he said.

Some others remain sceptical. There are groups, for example, that support the opposition National Solidarity Party's call for a referendum on the population issue.

What is clear is that Parliament may have passed the White Paper but the public debate on it is far from over.

The way forward

PAP backbencher MPs like Mr Seah Kian Peng are pinning their hopes on the amended motion, which he says deserves more attention.

He hopes Singaporeans read it, and take note of its emphasis on a strong Singaporean core, the need to moderate the flow of immigrants and calls on the Government to resolve current strains on infrastructure and to build ahead of demand.

"There is no reason why one should not support such a proposal," he says. What worries him are not alternative views but the tendency of some to engage in destructive discourse which is neither responsible nor reasoned.

Front-line civil service officers, for example, have endured abuse and threats, he notes, as anti-establishment sentiments have swelled in recent times. But Mr Seah also recognises that there are lessons for the PAP - and it comes down to good communication: "There needs to be some genuine and consistent exchange both of views and of convictions - a national view of how to take collective action."

Mr Liang says backbencher MPs have been and will be meeting ministers as part of their regular dialogues, to further understand the challenges and concerns arising from the White Paper.

"We are concerned... but we will work with the Government to see how we can strengthen that Singaporean core, and to take care of Singaporeans," he says.

With the recent fallout, all eyes are on how the PAP will recover from its missteps and work to win back public trust and confidence.

The Government also needs to continue the work of explaining and convincing Singaporeans of the serious demographic challenges ahead due to rapid ageing and falling fertility, which need society to work together to tackle.

Veteran PAP MP Charles Chong acknowledges that the Government has yet to win many hearts on the White Paper. But, he says, "Politics is about winning hearts and minds. The jury is still out on which is more important".

Dr Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies says of the whole debate: "Politics is the art of the possible, and for Singapore's sake, I hope we find more political leaders who seek to bring convergence."

Whether there is consensus on the Paper or not, one thing that political observers agree on is that the level of discourse needs to be elevated to one that is constructive.

Dr Koh says: "I hope we will leave this discourse about slapping each other behind us. It is a sure way to make the tone of politics and public life in Singapore an unhappy one. We can do better."