

## **Tough 'social choices' ahead**

**Local and foreign-born citizens differ over whether NS is a key marker**

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IF IT wants to solve problems such as a low fertility rate and low wages, Singapore will have to make some difficult 'social choices', said Acting Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports Chan Chun Sing.

For example, the country could turn its dismal total fertility rate (TFR) of 1.2 around, as Nordic countries managed to do - if it accepts women having children out of wedlock.

And it could raise the wages of cleaners - if people were willing to pay higher service and conservancy (S&C) charges.

Spelling out these trade-offs at a dialogue that wrapped up the Institute of Policy Studies conference on integration, Mr Chan then said: 'Are we prepared to do that? These are social choices that we have to make for ourselves.'

His question came during the discussion that the minister had yesterday with academics, students and government officials over issues such as immigration, productivity and population.

When someone asked why Singapore could not achieve the TFR of 1.9 that Nordic nations with similar populations had, Mr Chan noted that the TFR of married couples in Singapore and these countries were in fact about the same.

The difference in the overall TFR came from the children that many Scandinavian women had out of wedlock, he said, adding: 'It's a social choice that our society has to grapple with - whether that is acceptable to us.'

Asked why cleaners' wages were \$800 in Singapore but above \$2,000 in Nordic countries, he replied that raising wages was possible, if S&C charges were also raised to pay cleaners more.

But he also stressed that the Government had not given up on boosting Singapore's TFR, and that it would keep looking at how to encourage families to have babies, such as by making childcare more accessible and affordable.

And he said that the Government was not suggesting that immigration was the only way to keep Singapore's population - and labour force - from shrinking.

'It has never been true that we've only got one track, immigrants,' he said. 'This government has always tried at least three things together.'

These were boosting TFR, increasing productivity and immigration, he said of the Government's strategy that aimed to ensure that Singapore maintained its vibrant economy with spaces and opportunities for its people.

Mr Chan also tried to frame the debate over whether Singapore should cut down the influx of foreign workers and new migrants in another way.

Instead, he said the question was, what do Singaporeans need to sustain their current standard of living? The number of working adults supporting each elderly person will drop from about 7.5 today to about 2.5 in 2030, he noted. This means that every working adult will have to be three times as productive in future.

'That's something tremendous that we have to achieve,' said Mr Chan. 'We will try, but there are sectors that will not make such tremendous gains as there's only so much productivity you can achieve.'