

## **When in Singapore, act like a S'porean**

### **Integration is a two-way street: Citizens must welcome foreigners, but immigrants too must accept the Republic's core values**

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AS EVENTS of the past week have revealed, the divisions between Singaporeans and foreigners, between so-called 'old' Singaporeans and 'new' Singaporeans, are deep and worrisome.

We must take the task of integrating foreigners, 'new' Singaporeans, as seriously as we took racial integration or religious harmony. Indeed, the local-foreign divide may pose a more serious risk to our social stability now than racial differences. The differences within each race today - especially among Chinese and Indians - seem to be greater than the differences between the races. That is so chiefly because of the large inflow of ethnic Chinese from the mainland and ethnic Indians from the subcontinent into Singapore over the past decade or so. We have to deal with this problem - now, urgently - or we will have a fractured society, a divided polity.

Consider what has happened in Sweden and Denmark, two countries that many people in Singapore - progressives, liberals, centrists - admire: The anti-immigrant, far-right Danish People's Party is now Denmark's third largest party; and in Sweden, the equally anti-immigrant, extreme right Sweden Democrats won for the first time 20 out of 349 seats in the country's parliamentary election in September 2010.

The Danes - the only people in occupied Europe who resisted en masse the Nazi persecution of Jews during World War II - and the Swedes - synonymous almost with decency and tolerance - if the politics of such peoples can be altered in such ghastly directions because of anti-immigrant feelings, it behoves us in Singapore to pause, ponder and examine carefully our own situation.

The situation is not all black. But it isn't all white either. It is in shades of grey where new citizens - the main subject of this conference - are concerned; greyer with permanent residents; greyest, dark grey in fact, where Employment Pass and S-Pass holders, the dreaded foreign talent or 'FT' of the blogosphere, are concerned.

There is no doubt that Singapore took in immigrants at such a rate in the second half of the last decade so as to overwhelm our absorptive capacities - psychologically, socially, economically, and I fear, politically as well.

But the fact of the matter is Singapore cannot avoid continuing to bring in foreigners. Even if we allowed the number of non-residents in Singapore to go down from the current one in four people to one in five, we would continue to add foreigners. Even if we took the near-impossible step of just freezing our current workforce number - have a steady-state workforce, as it were - we would still have to bring in foreigners. This is because our birth rate is so low that if we were to halt all immigration now, as many people would be leaving the workforce as entering it within eight years in 2020. Soon after that, many more would be leaving the workforce than entering it, and Singapore's economy will totter into premature senescence.

How do we make immigration socially and politically acceptable? We have to have an open-door immigration policy. But how do we make that policy sustainable?

This is a complicated subject, but I'll make two suggestions.

One, not only must we have a big open gate to allow in immigrants - the right kind of immigrants, like Mr Sirajul Islam, who rescued his neighbours in a burning Housing Board flat - not only must we have a big open gate to welcome such immigrants, we must also have a high fence to keep out the people we don't want, and we must have speed bumps before that open gate to slow down, to pace out, the entry of new immigrants.<sup>1</sup>

We already do have a high fence. Illegal immigration is hardly a problem in Singapore, unlike in the United States and in parts of Europe. And we have speed bumps now too, for the Government has tightened the inflow of foreign workers since last year. We have full employment, so it isn't as though Singaporeans are being displaced by foreigners.

But there is enough anecdotal evidence of employers replacing Singaporeans, especially among the PMET (professional, manager, executive and technician) class, with cheaper foreigners, to give one pause.

We should consider what many other countries, including Australia and the US, have: require employers to show they cannot get a Singaporean or PR to fill particular positions before they are allowed to bring in a foreign national. If we don't have highly visible speed bumps, in addition to that high fence, an open-door immigration policy will become politically unsustainable.

But once we let in people through that gate, we must welcome them, make them one with the Singapore family, integrate them. That is the second point I wish to make: We cannot have a house divided between old Singaporeans and new Singaporeans, first-class Singaporeans and second-class Singaporeans.

And integration cannot be a one-way street, with Singaporeans smiling and welcoming foreigners. It has to be a two-way street. Integration does not mean assimilation - but it does mean accepting a certain set of core beliefs and habits that we have come to see as quintessentially Singaporean: among them, multiracialism, religious tolerance, meritocracy, democracy and good order.

When in Singapore, act like a Singaporean - and that goes for Singaporeans too, for discrimination of the foreigner, intolerance of the other, prejudice, aren't core Singaporean principles.

If I may rewrite S. Rajaratnam slightly, we must all learn to say or think: We, the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as one united people, regardless of race, language, religion, or country of origin.

***The writer is director at the Institute of Policy Studies and a Straits Times associate editor. This is an extract from his speech yesterday at the opening of the institute's Conference on Integration.***

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<sup>1</sup> *The image of a high fence and big gate was used by Tom Friedman in a column on US immigration policy: 'America today is struggling to find the right balance of policies on immigration. Personally, I favor a very high fence , with a very big gate.'* (New York Times, 5 April 2006)