

Steps needed to convince S'poreans about population increase

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SINGAPORE — Judging from the immediate reaction to the Population White Paper soon after its release, the Government looks to have its work cut out to convince some Singaporeans that the nation can cope with 6.5 to 6.9 million people on the island.

Members of Parliament (MPs) TODAY spoke to acknowledged that steps have to be taken—including making sure the policies set in motion bear fruit — before Singaporeans can accept the increase in population.

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Ms Lee Bee Wah, NEE SOON GRC MP

Nee Soon GRC MP Lee Bee Wah said: “It is not easy to convince (Singaporeans) because people will think that ‘every day I go to work, (it) is already so crowded’.”

She added: “No point talking to them about all these theories ... If you don’t help them to see, resolve the current problem, they won’t be convinced. My suggestion is that you have to resolve the current problem first.”

Some netizens felt the numbers were “frightening”, others noted that infrastructure today has yet to catch up with demand. An overseas Singaporean even wrote that he would stay away and not return to the Republic. Amid the chorus of doubters were some netizens who viewed the White Paper more positively, with one pointing out the need for a sufficient base of working-age people to support the growing ageing population.

Social and policy researchers suggested specifying the types of skills needed from foreigners and beefing up Singaporeans’ sense of security to get the public behind the new population projections.

Policymakers could spell out the areas or sectors where immigrants were needed, as is the practice in some other countries, said Institute of Policy Studies Senior Research Fellow Leong Chan-Hoong. “They may say, if you are an expert in biomedical science or if you are an expert in IT, the chances of getting a long-term residential visa or permanent residency will be much higher than someone else (without such skill sets).

“That kind of transparency and information will be more reassuring and helpful,” said Dr Leong, who added that resentment is generally of the policy towards foreigners, and not the foreigners themselves.

Sociologist Tan Ern Ser said the social and psychological barriers would be harder to overcome than physical barriers when it comes to a higher population density. The “fundamental solution” lies in strengthening Singaporeans’ sense of security, which can lead to more generosity of spirit towards new immigrants and foreigners in our midst, he said.

On some Singaporeans' resistance to more new immigrants, Ms Lee noted: "If Singaporeans can give birth to more children then, of course, we don't have to bring in foreigners — that will be the most ideal."

But she noted that with the dismal birth rates, it would be ambitious to think that they could be raised to such a level that Singapore will need fewer new immigrants in the future.

Now that the White Paper — nearly a year in the making — is out, Chua Chu Kang MP Zaqy Mohamad reckons it is time for more engagement: For Singaporeans to seek reassurance and ask questions, and for the Government to communicate its planning considerations. This way, a consensus can be forged and citizens can be assured that they would not be disadvantaged.

He said: "It has to be a process which the Government has to undertake in terms of helping (Singaporeans) understand the considerations ... Perhaps through the various dialogue platforms ... we try to get some consensus."