

The nation may be ageing, but its leadership cannot be aged: DPM Teo

Kelly Ng

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Although Singapore's population is greying, it must not allow its national leadership to become aged, said Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean.

"You don't want a whole nation to be held hostage to the health of a cohort of people who are already senior and are getting more and more senior with each passing year," he added.

Mr Teo was speaking at a conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies on the Republic's ageing demography.

He was responding to a question from former nominated member of Parliament Geh Min on whether the Government would consider shifting its leadership composition to include a larger representation of older people.

"I would find that very encouraging, especially if the population is (getting) older, you would want policy makers and legislators who can see the older generation's point of view as well," said Dr Geh, 67, who served as an NMP between January 2005 and April 2006.

Singapore can even consider having legislators helm a "Ministry of Ageing", she quipped.

In response, Mr Teo stressed the importance of leadership renewal.

"As a country, we might grow older, but the leadership must not become aged as well," he said.

"Even though I can still keep on running, I know that I am not running the same way as I was running five or 10 years ago... I feel more aches."

The ruling People's Action Party is known for its vigorous leadership renewal, with up to a quarter of its members of Parliament making way for young blood at each general election.

Nevertheless, Mr Teo acknowledged that it would be useful to have some more senior members in the Cabinet, noting that the Republic already has a convention of having former prime ministers remain as Senior Ministers.

This practice has been a "great help" for younger members of the Cabinet, he said.

In his speech before the dialogue, Mr Teo noted that Singapore has moved from an "ageing" to an "aged" society much faster than any other country.

For instance, while it took France over a century to transit from an "ageing society" to an "aged society", it has taken the Republic only 19 years to do so.

Researchers commonly refer to an “ageing” society as having more than 7 per cent of its population aged 65 and above, and an “aged” society as having more than 14 per cent of its population in that age bracket.

“We crossed that mark last year,” he said.

But at the same time, he believes that the Republic is much better prepared, with a slew of policies and initiatives put in place early.

The Central Provident Fund (CPF), he said, is one such “resilient institution”, which has helped Singaporeans save for their old age and pay for their medical expenses.

Describing the introduction of CPF Life — which provides life-long monthly payouts to Singaporeans and permanent residents aged 65 and above — and universal health insurance scheme Medishield Life as “game-changers”, Mr Teo said: “These national social risk-pooling schemes mean that, to a larger extent than before, we are all helping one another to cope better together with the uncertainties associated with ageing.”

The community must also play its part in enabling seniors to “age with vigour”, he stressed.

While there are many grants for companies to redesign workplaces and jobs to make them more friendly for seniors, these schemes are meaningful only when employers value and want to tap the experiences and skills that seniors can offer, said Mr Teo.

The public service has been “doing its part” in tapping older workers, he said, noting that there were 3,000 public officers aged 65 and above in December 2016, six times the number in 2010.

“Living longer does not mean being old for longer. It means staying young for longer. We need to keep fit, keep learning, and keep contributing,” he said.