

## **Paul Tambyah urges rethink of immigration policy to prioritise talent, belief, and ties over quotas**

**At the IPS Singapore Perspectives 2025 conference, Professor Paul Anantharajah Tambyah questioned if immigration and housing policies align with Singapore's values of fairness. He proposed prioritizing talent over racial quotas.**

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At the Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspectives 2025 conference on 20 January, Professor Dr Paul Anantharajah Tambyah, chairman of the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), raised thought-provoking questions on immigration and housing policies, challenging their alignment with Singapore's values of fairness and inclusivity.

Tambyah, who is also professor at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore, questioned whether Singapore's immigration policies could be restructured to prioritise individuals with strong ties to the country, belief in its principles, and valuable talents, over the existing racial quota framework.

Responding to this, Aaron Maniam, a fellow at the Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford, highlighted the delicate balancing act required in policymaking.

While he aligned with the vision of recognising diverse talents and commitments, he emphasised that practical constraints like societal capacity and space must also be considered.

Maniam further explained that, ideally, the society should acknowledge commitments beyond employment contributions, but public comfort with significant population shifts and the nation's carrying capacity must also be taken into account.

### **Cherian George Suggests Public Consultation and Racial Quotas Key to Tackling Policy Credibility and Harmony**

Cherian George, professor at Hong Kong Baptist University's School of Communication, brought attention to policy-making processes and their perceived credibility.

He suggested that many Singaporeans view the government as overly pro-business, leaving loopholes that favour employers at the expense of local workers.

George argued for public consultation in policymaking, advocating for an approach that maintains an "arms-length relationship" with the government.

"This approach to managing wicked problems, especially problems that involve moral trade-offs, has been proven to work if we want to solve this," he explained, urging Singapore to avoid polarisation and toxicity in immigration debates.

Ambassador-at-Large Chan Heng Chee, who moderated the panel, also weighed in.

Chan highlighted that Singaporean officials often learn from other countries and stressed the importance of maintaining racial quotas in immigration to ensure balance and address the "optical presentation of numbers."

“I think, minority communities if they see the numbers shrinking, it has a very destabilising effect. So I would not so easily stop worrying about quotas. I think quotas and having the numbers there give some sense of comfort.”

Notably, there was an audible gasp in parts of the room when Prof Chan seemingly implied that minority communities might wish to remain small minorities indefinitely.

### **Tambyah Questions EIP’s Exclusion from Private Housing, Highlights Perception of Inequality**

After Minister for Culture, Community, and Youth Edwin Tong delivered his closing speech, Paul Tambyah shifted the discussion to housing policies, questioning the scope of the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP).

The EIP, which enforces ethnic quotas in public housing to maintain a balanced mix of ethnic communities, does not apply to private properties such as Good Class Bungalows (GCBs), landed homes, and condominiums.

“If the government believes the EIP is so crucial for integration, is so important for integration, will this be rolled out to GCBs (Good Class Bungalows), landed properties and condominiums? And if not, doesn’t this add fuel to the common view that there’s one rule in Singapore for the rich and one for the rest?” Tambyah asked.

### **Tong Warns Against Oversimplifying Housing Policies as Wealth-Based Inequality**

In response, Tong defended the EIP’s focus on public housing, highlighting that 85% of Singapore’s population resides in Housing Development Board (HDB) flats.

“There are grants that are given, different types of grants from different locations, and the way in which flats are selected through these grants, as well, is also a nudge,” Tong explained, adding that private estates, being more decentralised, are harder to regulate in the same manner.

Tong also emphasised the vibrancy of public housing estates, where communal spaces such as hawker centres, schools, and markets foster community interaction.

“There is a stronger sense of that community, and it’s important that that community be intermixed as much as possible. Local, foreigner, and even within Singapore...and I believe that is a very important consideration for us as we look at multiculturalism.”

Acknowledging the perception of inequality between public and private housing, Tong cautioned against oversimplifying the issue as a disparity based on wealth.

“And I’m not so sure that it is great to bump it up, and say that there are therefore different laws that apply to rich and not-so-rich.”

“And I think we take the surrogate as on private property as a marker for income, it may not always apply, in all cases, so I would beg to differ with you on this.”