

DPM Heng: Having new citizens is very much part of our effort to take care of Singaporeans

The deputy PM said that a “narrow, nativist approach” in matters of immigration and trade would not be to the country’s advantage

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Singapore—At the annual conference of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), Singapore Perspectives 2020, held at Marina Bay Sands on Monday (Jan 20), Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat emphasised the importance of welcoming new citizens, and resisting divisive efforts detrimental to the country.

DPM Heng, who was the keynote speaker at the conference, said during a question and answer portion, “I am very troubled that so many people are seeking to exploit these differences, instead of making the effort to integrate them. They have made this into an issue, they have made this into ‘You are not taking care of Singaporeans, you are not taking care of Singaporeans’ interests’.

On the contrary, having new citizens is very much part of our effort to take care of Singaporeans.”

TODAY Online reports that the Deputy Prime Minister spent over an hour answering questions from different people in the audience of around 1,120 people, including members of civil society organisations, leaders, businessmen, academics and public servants.

DPM Heng was asked by Goh Meng Seng, the leader of People’s Power Party, a question concerning the new citizens that Singapore accepts yearly, which number between 15,000 and 25,000, and from whom the majority are from Malaysia, China and the Philippines.

Yahoo Singapore reported that Mr Goh asked the man largely touted to be Singapore’s next Prime Minister “if you look at 2007 to 2019, we are giving out about 20,000 new citizenships, especially (to people from) mainland China, Malaysia, India and the Philippines. When geopolitics changes, with the rise of Chinese dominance in the region, where will (the new citizens) stand when we have to make a difficult decision in geopolitics? You may give citizenship to (Chinese nationals)... but their allegiances will not change overnight.”

DPM Heng answered that a “narrow, nativist approach” in matters of immigration and trade would not be to the country’s advantage, underlining the fact that one out of every three marriages in Singapore is currently between a Singaporean and a foreign national.

Of new Singaporean citizens he said, “For those people who have become Singapore citizens, they have become citizens by conviction. They have left their country and decided that Singapore is a better place for them and their children in the future.

So we should, as Singaporeans, make the best effort to integrate them into our society, to welcome them, so that they can be part of our team. Having the foreigners in our midst adds to our strength.”

As the Member of Parliament representing Tampines GRC, he has had constituents come to him during Meet The People Sessions asking for help with citizenship for their foreign husbands or wives.

Singapore’s multiracial, multi-religious, and multi-lingual nature, DPM Heng said, is advantageous to its citizens, as it provides a “very high degree of cultural sensitivity.”

He said, “I met a group of young students the other day and a few of them have foreign students in their class, and they told me about their learnings from other countries... I felt very cheered by that — I think when they grow up, they will be in a good position to interact with ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and the rest of the world, and that is the Singaporean advantage... Especially in a world where people are turning inwards, less willing to co-operate, Singaporeans can extend a hand and be bridge-builders in a more fragmented world.

The key point is that whatever we do, it must be to take care of Singaporeans. But if we take a nativist approach and say ‘Let’s keep out the world, trade, and other people’, then I think eventually, Singapore will wither.”