

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

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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.

### **Surrogacy and serious ethical issues it raises not to be taken lightly: DPM Teo**

The Government has not moved to legalise surrogacy because it is a “very sensitive and delicate issue” that the society has to consider carefully, Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean said on Monday (Jan 22).

Mr Teo, who is also Coordinating Minister for National Security, was fielding questions following his speech at the annual Singapore Perspectives conference on how Singapore should prepare for the implications of its ageing population, and a member of the audience urged the Government to consider “creative policies” for boosting the country’s falling birth rates.

Long-running efforts to encourage Singaporeans to have children have not yielded significant results, with the total fertility rate dropping to the third-lowest level of 1.2 in 2016.

At the end of the dialogue, ambassador-at-large Chan Heng Chee was prompted to chime in, asking how Singaporeans would relate to the practice of surrogacy. Last month, the courts rejected a gay Singaporean doctor’s bid to adopt his biological son, who was born through a surrogate mother in the United States.

To that, Mr Teo said: "This is something which we would want to take very, very carefully... These are important, serious, ethical issues which one has to deal with."

He talked about the well-publicised case of Australian couple David and Wendy Farnell, who were accused of abandoning one of a pair of twins born to them through Ms Pattaramon Chanbua, a surrogate mother in Thailand. The couple had returned to Australia with baby Pipah in February 2014, while her twin brother Gammy, who has Down syndrome, was left behind.

The couple were taken to court and the case caused a furore, but the Farnells were eventually cleared of charges of abandoning the boy. Western Australia's family court found that the couple had wanted to keep the boy, but Ms Chanbua had decided to keep him instead.

"Now, we have to ask ourselves about the ethics of surrogacy, especially in cases like these. There are difficult ethical choices around surrogacy, especially paid surrogacy. That is why we have not moved (with regards to) surrogacy in Singapore, especially international surrogacy, because it is a very sensitive, delicate... issue," Mr Teo stressed.

He added: "The position which we have in Singapore is, I think, a good position — in that almost all children in Singapore are born in wedlock with fathers and mothers, and that gives society a certain stability and a certain framework in which we bring up children. I think those societies which have undergone very, very rapid social and familial transitions have encountered some serious challenges. We don't know who is right; we don't know who is wrong. I think this is one of those issues (which requires) a little prudence (and that) is probably the better part."