

COMMENT: Is it because he's a foreigner? (He's not)

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Below is from the Institute of Policy Studies survey on fault lines released earlier this week. I admire how quickly the researchers incorporated the incident into the survey.

“At this juncture, it is useful to consider a contemporary incident which unfolded at the time of the (survey’s) release. The video of a condominium resident verbally abusing a security guard went viral in late October 2019, with the resulting fallout on social media spotlighting the callous classist comments made by the resident – a JP Morgan employee of presumably foreign Indian origin (Yong & Iau, 2019).”

“Much of the online discourse, both measured and vitriolic, 1) called for punitive action to be taken against the resident, including arresting him, investigating his educational credentials, dismissing him from his job, and / or deporting him; 2) referenced the resident’s foreign origins and his treatment of the local Singaporean security guard in articulating a prevailing local-foreign class divide; and 3) referenced the resident’s ethnic and foreign origins as the raison d’être for his undignified outburst (HardwareZone Forum, 2019).”

“The above incident provides a clear vignette of how immigration and class issues (and race to some extent) can intersect, as well as some expectations of government involvement to mitigate immigration and class issues.”

“Netizens often referenced CECA (a bilateral comprehensive trade agreement between India and Singapore enabling freer flows of labour) as an adverse state-of- affairs that should be addressed by the state. In the same vein, security associations, unions and politicians expressed desire for more legislation to protect the rights of lower-paid workers and robustly penalise abuse or harassment of the latter (Tang, 2019; Yong & Iau, 2019).”

The researchers forgot to include religion. Listening to the video, the man clearly thought that the rules on parking in his condominium were not equally enforced for Hindus who celebrate Deepavali, and for those who celebrate Chinese New Year. Is this a reflection of how even researchers are chary about discussing religion? Or maybe they didn't see the full video...

In my view, this incident reflects everything that is horrible about us. The consequent baying for blood, with online petitions and threats to the man and his employer speaks volumes for how low-class we are. I don't condone what the man did. He lost his temper and started swearing. He took it out on the security guard doing his job instead of directing his ire at the Management Council, who comprise his fellow-owners.

He should have just said: “What? This is what the MC said? Stupid rule! I'm going to talk to them! Idiots! They don't have visitors who come and see them or what? Ok, uncle, I won't cause you any more trouble. But can close one eye or not and just let my visitor park? Promise they will leave by...” After all, according to media reports, he addresses the older man as Uncle.

You might have realised by now that I did not name the man. Because I think the naming and shaming has gone on far enough. If you can earn a reproof even from the mild-mannered

Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam, a fellow Hindu who celebrates Deepavali, then you are in hot water indeed.

But the scenario played out at his condominium is really a familiar one. Condo residents don't have to be foreigners to have bad manners – and they can be of any race, too. From my balcony in my old condominium, I have witnessed too many times the commotion between residents and security guards at the entry gate.

So, first, let's admit that Singaporeans aren't angels, either. Most of us, at one time or other, have lost our tempers unreasonably. The difference is that we're not caught on video. Even if we were, I am not sure the level of vitriol would be so high. Just think about Briton Anton Casey in 2014.

I wager that any time there is trouble, there would be this deep down hope or even expectation that the troublemaker is a foreigner so that we can indulge in some nationalistic (or xenophobic) ranting. If the person is a citizen, never mind also. Some aspersions can still be cast on how they look, what they say, how they say it, where they live, the jobs they do and so forth. You can throw stones anywhere and everywhere. You can't, however, ask that they be deported. Because, well, citizen.

In this man's case, I daresay people jumped to the conclusion that he is a foreigner because of his accent. If they had watched the video, he did talk about flashing his IC. Now we're told he is a citizen, albeit a new one, because he married a Singaporean.

And even that seems too troublesome to some people, who say that he only met his wife because he was allowed to work here.

The interrogation then goes deeper and deeper, into how he got here. And, of course, who is to blame for his presence.

Immigration

The IPS survey showed that almost half of all respondents, cutting across age, race and educational level, wants the G to play a bigger role in mitigating immigration issues. This is one policy, if mismanaged, which will be laid at the G's door. On other fault-lines, such as race and religion, the calls were more subdued.

This is to be expected because the G holds the immigration tap, which can be opened to cause a flood or tightened to amount to a trickle. Since 2011, immigration policies have been changed and fair employment practices introduced to make sure attempts to hire locals are made before resorting to foreigners. This is something we must acknowledge. So what more do we want?

Here's what this Forum Letter writer said: "Immigration policies are not just about numbers. The quality of immigrants, such as education level and skills, should be considered.

"The authorities have information and data that they use to make policies. They should share the information with the public so that we can better understand the rationale of the policies.

They should also present a breakdown of all foreigners here, including occupation, country of birth, age profile, average income and living conditions.”

The G has always been averse to giving citizens a detailed breakdown of foreigners residing here, probably thinking that more information would generate more heat rather than light. Can we, for example, really come to an agreement on the “type” of foreigner we should welcome? Would it be based on ethnic, economic or other considerations? (Usually, economic reasons are the forefront.)

But what is clear is that, when the G considers giving citizenship to the 25,000 or so permanent residents annually, it tries to keep the overall ethnic ratio the same.

The issue, however, is less about who is given citizenship than the composition of the resident population, which is now at 5.7 million. Of this number, Singapore citizens make up 3.5 million. The rest are foreigners. Does the G only look at economic reasons for their entry, or also their ethnicity, what they do and where they live after they get a pass?

The IPS survey indicated that it is the more affluent among the population who worry about mismanaging immigration. Researchers posit that this is because they believe they face competition for jobs as well as in the private housing market (HDB is out of bounds to foreigners).

Both aspects are worth looking into because they are part of our lived experiences. It is hard for the retrenched PMET (and they are among the biggest group) to accept that he is redundant while he sees so many foreigners looking extremely employed, striding around his old workplace. Despite fair employment rules, there is a niggling suspicion of a back door entry, especially for Indian nationals.

CECA

Already, one political party, the Progress Singapore Party, has indicated that it will make CECA, the trade agreement between India and Singapore, an issue. Established in 2007, it is seen as a backdoor method of letting Indians work in Singapore. The G’s position is that any Indian national would still have to meet its immigration criteria to be admitted. But under CECA’s intra-corporate transfers, it seems that companies based in India can relocate its own employees here – no quotas imposed. It is time the G clarified CECA before it gets too hot to handle and make Indian nationals here a target of xenophobic attacks.

The IPS survey also showed that “distance” mattered. Most respondents set their ideal limit on the proportion of foreigners in the vicinity at 20 per cent at most. Take a look below for how the proportions change depending on whether they asked about the neighbourhood, block and school level.

Race

The sense of being overwhelmed by people who look different, talk different and act different can be manifested in different ways. It leads to a kind of prickliness about having to share

facilities or jostle with each other at the market. Unlike the HDB estate, the ethnic quota policy does not apply to private property, and some condominiums have an imbalanced spread of ethnicities.

What sort of imbalance? When you believe you are beginning to see more of one ethnic group and less of another – and you know they aren't tourists.

The Chinese community, the majority here, is the most concerned about the impact of an immigration influx. The IPS researchers used the term "especially poignant".

"Several factors could contribute to this: 1) inflows of non-Chinese immigrants with varying norms and cultures, and 2) inflows of Chinese immigrants with differing norms and cultures relative to local-born Chinese," said IPS researchers.

I will stop pussy-footing around the subject and just come right out and say that it is probably the near ubiquitous presence of Indian nationals in certain areas that is disconcerting. Unlike the Chinese nationals, they tend to stick to themselves and hold themselves apart.

I daresay citizens will open their hearts and wallets to foreign workers in low-paid jobs who get bullied by citizens, but it's quite another thing to have well-paid foreigners throwing his weight around locals.

Money

The much-vilified man exemplifies the kind of fault-lines that differences in socio-economic class can lead to. He flung his status – "I paid \$1.5m" – at the security guard. He made clear that being able to afford private property means that he shouldn't be treated like some HDB flat dweller. I suppose he could mean that he considered HDB residents an inferior species of being or I could be generous and assume he believes that the HDB residents are criss-crossed with even more parking rules. (The poor man doesn't realise that it's easier for visitors to park in an HDB estate so long as you can find a lot).

It is bigoted sense of entitlement, as Mr Tharman put it.

I would not hesitate to say, however, that a lot of people suffer from the same condition, whether it's about loudly demanding to be served, insisting on being first or putting someone else down whether because of who we are, what we earn or the type of house we live in. There is little respect of the person on the other end of the transaction. This is one of the less salubrious outcomes of a meritorious system – and some of us are guilty of it too.

Already, the IPS survey is sounding some alarm bells. There are too many people who say they feel comfortable interacting with people from the same income level. The flip side is also true – they find it too hard to mix with those out of their income bracket.

Class

The issue of forging friendships across class lines becomes more pressing. The recent fuss about Raffles Girls School's relocation to Braddell as "to allow our girls to reach out more to

the ordinary Singaporean” caused a stir. The staff member of the top school quoted by The New Paper might be well-meaning and even right to express this belief, but it was seen as downright insensitive and evidence of an elitist mindset.

Never mind that what was said or not said. Just applaud the move and call for more outreach work and a breakdown of class consciousness in schools. The guys have National Service to build up ties with other people of different races and socio-economic status, the girls have no similar rite of passage.

Back to the man in the middle of all this. He has apologised to the security guard, although some still say it's too little, too late and insincere. His employer has been alerted and I would think his Singaporean wife would be worried to death about the loutish behaviour of Singaporeans who can't accept that people, whether foreigners or locals, are fallible. Their words and actions are far worse than what her husband had displayed. In shaming the man, they shame the rest of us.

We should look instead at the calm composure displayed by the security guard and emulate his behaviour. And we should promise ourselves that we would never look askance at people who are merely doing their (thankless) jobs.

This commentary was reproduced from Bertha Henson's blog Bertha Harian.