

Singaporeans must welcome new citizens, not allow others to 'exploit' tensions and divide us: Heng Swee Keat

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Yahoo News Singapore, 20 January 2020

SINGAPORE — Singaporeans must help to welcome and integrate new citizens into society, rather than allowing others to cast doubt on their loyalties and hence divide society, said Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat on Monday (20 January).

"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'," noted Heng, the designated successor to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

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

The 58-year-old was responding to a question from People's Power Party chief Goh Meng Seng, 50. The question and answer session took place at the Singapore Perspectives 2020 conference, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), after Heng delivered the keynote address.

Singapore accepts between 15,000 and 25,000 new citizens each year, many of whom are from Malaysia, China and the Philippines. Alluding to this and Chinese dominance in the region, Goh asked, "Where will (new citizens) stand when we have to make a difficult decision in geopolitics?"

Using 中国情意结 (zhong guo qing yi jie), a Chinese saying that refers to an affinity for the Middle Kingdom due to kinship ties, he added, "Will this affect our political direction? Will they actually (be) pro-China, or pro-Philippines, or pro-India?"

Goh was among several prominent opposition members in attendance, including Paul Tambyah of the Singapore Democratic Party and Leong Mun Wai, the newly appointed assistant secretary general of the Progress Singapore Party.

'A narrow, nativist approach'

In response to Goh, Heng said that a "narrow, nativist approach" to trade and immigration would not serve Singapore well.

He pointed out that one in three marriages today involves a Singaporean and a citizen of another country. At the Meet The People Sessions, he is often approached for assistance in obtaining citizenship for these foreign spouses. "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."

Heng, who is also a Member of Parliament for Tampines GRC, added, “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.”

Citing a United Nations report that tracked migration patterns over the last 30 years, a Straits Times report on Sunday revealed that most migrants to the Republic actually hail from Malaysia, not China. From 1990-2019, the country took in more than 2.1 million migrants.

Heng added that the “multiracial, multi-religious, multi-lingual” nature of Singapore is an asset for Singaporeans, giving them a “very high degree of cultural sensitivity” in an age where people all over the world are turning inwards. He compared them to adaptor plugs: “Wherever we go, we can plug in and draw energy and link up with all. We can be bridge builders in a more fragmented world.”