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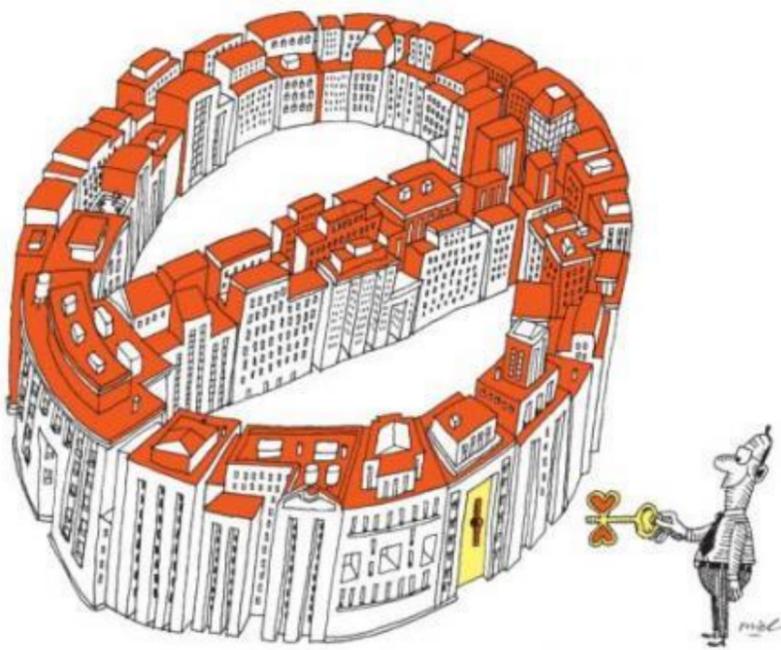
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BY INVITATION

It's time for love in politics

The debate about Singapore's population growth needs more than just good arguments. As citizens feel marginalised in their own home, they need a dose of empathy - even love - from political leaders.

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BY CHAN HENG CHEE, FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

On a recent trip to Japan I heard a great deal about the country's ageing and declining population. The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications reported that the nation's population had fallen by 217,000 to 127,298,000 as of Oct 1, 2013, marking a third straight year of decline.

A Japanese think-tank which works closely with one of the ministries projected that Japan's population will drop to 87 million by the year 2060 and 50 million by 2100.

Early this year, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said immigration and bringing women into the workforce would be at the core of his growth strategy for Japan.

Historically, Japan's workforce has mainly consisted of men. But now measures are being discussed to promote the advancement of women. On immigration, Japan traditionally resisted diluting its population with foreign immigrants and is globally regarded as a closed society.

That the country is considering the change is a minor revolution in Japanese terms. Even so, the change will be limited.

By immigration, the government means giving foreigners work visas of three to five years, particularly in nursing care and housekeeping support. Some Japanese men think the national culture will discourage many women from leaving their children for the workplace. Clearly, Japan is in the early stages of experimenting with policy solutions.

The Singapore population will start to shrink in 2025. But the Japanese model is not one Singapore can adopt. Unlike Japan, Singapore starts with a much smaller population. There were 3.8 million Singaporeans and permanent residents last year. Of this, 10.5 per cent, or 300,000, are 65 years and older. By 2030, this figure will rise to 900,000 or 20 per cent of the population. In 2000, the dependency ratio was 9:1. In 2020, the dependency ratio will be 2 to 1.

The dependency ratio refers to the ratio of dependents - people younger than 15 or older than 64 - to the working-age population.

Singapore has opted to augment its population and economic growth through immigration and pro-birth policies. In the last decade we have been extremely open as a society and economy. But the foreigners flowed in too fast, and the infrastructure could not cope, leading to a strong backlash against the influx of foreigners.

This backlash is happening to every global economy and city in the world that has a policy of openness to immigration. But the tone of the debate and the outcry in Singapore against foreigners has been so venomous, it is seriously disturbing. Fortunately, moderate voices are now emerging to offer another perspective.

How can we drain the bile from this narrative? How can some balance be restored to a debate on an issue that is critical to our future?

Sustainable growth

THE Population White Paper kicked up a storm when it was released by the government early last year.

Is Singapore going to maintain an open growth model for our population? Or will the country opt for a sustainable growth model, one that allows the introduction of new residents at a rate and pace that will allow the Singapore identity to be maintained?

These questions were answered by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the close of the parliamentary debate on the subject. He said that although he did not think six million was enough to meet Singapore's needs in 2030, "the total population in 2030 should be significantly below 6.9 million and in the long term not increase significantly beyond that". After 2030, it was up to future governments and the people to decide.

There are those who have chosen not to believe this statement, even though the number of work visas has been cut and the influx of foreigners moderated. So the point needs to be reiterated.

There is no doubt, given the limitations of our land size (and the fact that we have reached the limits of reclamation), that whether building upwards or going underground, there is a number beyond which we cannot sustain.

It is not easy to determine the optimal population for Singapore. The parameters of what is considered optimal may shift as new technology changes perceptions and capability. What is optimal today may be different in 2030 and 2050.

Despite much confusion, it is clear from the Prime Minister's words - and from recent policies such as the tightening in the supply of foreign labour - that the sustainable growth model is what the government has decided on and Singaporeans are more comfortable with.

Still, there is a minority who insist, "no more foreigners".

But I believe this is not practicable. The truth is that as a country we have to work on sustainable growth.

We cannot do this by shutting Singapore from foreigners. We need to have the ability to absorb the growth in population and integrate foreigners with Singaporeans at the core.

The sheer volume of diversity arrived so fast, we have not had time to assimilate foreigners into our Singapore culture. The result has been a sense of alienation and the development of "us-them" feelings.

The infrastructure stresses will be resolved with time as new train lines come on stream and more buses hit the road. New housing supply is also coming on the market.

Undervalued at home

REVERSING the sense among some Singaporeans that they have been marginalised and undervalued in their society, however, will be more difficult.

Competition for jobs lies at the heart of the problem. To be clear, there are two groups of foreign workers. The first are the unskilled who come to do the work Singaporeans abhor. They are not the ones Singaporeans are competing with.

The second, the educated and skilled workers, are in direct competition with local professionals, managers, executives and technicians. Singaporeans find they are not getting the jobs they want and point to foreign professional and skilled workers taking the slots. We can begin by hiring qualified Singaporeans for the job wherever possible and in decision-making positions where feasible. This is something every employer can do. We don't have to wait for the nudge from government.

In some jobs, Singaporeans will cost more, but we have to begin somewhere. Singaporeans too must address some of the concerns employers - both local and foreign - have expressed.

It is said Singaporeans do not always have the right skills for the job, or they are not prepared to meet certain job requirements, such as living overseas. To deal with this, we need better job mentors in schools and universities to talk about the expectations of both employers and job seekers. We need more Singaporeans who are ambitious and risk-takers.

It will take time before the rebalance is achieved, but there is a realisation that we must recalibrate.

Singapore cannot afford to be a country that is closed and autarkic. Singaporeans now expect a certain level of development and standards to be maintained, and this requires a foreign presence.

Empathetic leadership

RIGHTLY or wrongly, Singaporeans believe they are not valued and appreciated in their own country. Singaporeans want reassurance from their leaders and love. Yes, love.

Singaporeans are looking for more than just a transactional relationship with their political leaders. The old politics of using good arguments to persuade or deliver the public goods and services will not suffice. Arguments are still important. After all, the Singapore electorate is a rational one.

But increasingly, Singaporeans young and old are looking for more from political leaders. They want to know that politicians too share their joys and sorrows, and indeed, even feel their pain.

They will wonder of those in power: "Do you understand my situation? Do you empathise with my situation?" Compassion and communication are critical at this juncture in Singapore politics.

It helps when leaders like Prime Minister Lee and Foreign Minister K Shanmugam take to social media, Facebook and Twitter to share their thoughts and pictures. Leaders are then viewed as stepping down from their pedestals to be "one of us". Political leaders will need to go further in their communication and ways of life, to communicate compassion and empathy.



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The Prime Minister began to address this with the recent Pioneer Generation Package.

We are into a phase of politics beyond the transactional, into the politics of empathy and individual worth. Apart from expecting goods and services, voters expect to be valued as individuals. Responding to this is not the same thing as going soft.

It is the politics of the day.

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