

DPM'S SPEECH ON POPULATION AT THE COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY, 5 FEB 2009

PREAMBLE

Mr Speaker, Sir. I thank Dr Teo Ho Pin, Mr Gautam Banerjee and Mr Ang Mong Seng for their comments and suggestions on our population strategy. During this economic downturn, it is even more critical that Singaporeans understand the objective of our population strategy.

POPULATION GROWTH FOR SINGAPORE AND SINGAPOREANS

2. The primary objective of our population strategy is to serve the interests of Singapore and Singaporeans. Mr Gautam Banerjee talked about the need to retain local talent and supplement them with foreign talent so that Singapore can remain globally competitive. I agree with him. Not enough babies are born in Singapore every year. Without immigration, our population will start to decline by about 2020 just like Japan, whose population shrank in 2005. We need to continue to encourage marriage and parenthood, engage our Overseas Singaporeans, and bring in suitable immigrants who can contribute to Singapore.

3. Many Singaporeans are concerned about job security in this period of worldwide economic recession. The Resilience Package, including the Jobs Credit Scheme announced in the Budget Speech, aims to help Singaporeans keep their jobs. We can also expect the number of foreigners seeking employment in Singapore to slow down.

4. Some countries, such as the UK and Australia, are limiting foreign manpower. We should not do likewise. As Mr Banerjee mentioned, this would be short-sighted and could ultimately lead to more job losses for Singaporeans. Even in this economic downturn, there are sectors in our economy which still need foreign workers to supplement the local workforce in order to stay in business. For example, in the biomedical sciences industry where there is a shortage of local expertise, highly-skilled foreigners have helped the industry expand its output from \$6 billion in 2000 to \$24 billion in 2007. There are also jobs that locals shun, such as those in construction.

INTEGRATION OF NEW IMMIGRANTS

5. Dr Teo Ho Pin asked for an update on the number of new citizens and permanent residents, our efforts to integrate new residents, and the effectiveness of our population measures. Mr Ang Mong Seng asked if we should be using the term "new citizens".

6. In 2008, we welcomed 20,513 new Singapore citizens and 79,167 new PRs, up from 17,334 new citizens and 63,627 new PRs in 2007. This could be due to the good economy and the broadening of the eligibility criteria in 2004. I would like to assure Dr Teo that there has been no change to these criteria since then. Unlike Mr Ang, I think it is alright to use the term "new citizens". There is no special significance

to the term. It is simply a descriptor of foreigners who have decided to make Singapore their home. Over time, this distinction will be blurred as their children grow up and become like our children. The important issue is not whether they are new citizens, but whether they can successfully integrate into our society. When they do, they become part of us.

7. There will be cultural differences between native and new citizens. Integration is a two-way process. Singaporeans need to understand and accept immigrants, while immigrants need to make the effort to become a part of the Singapore community.

8. As Dr Teo pointed out, the People's Association has more than 700 Integration and Naturalisation Champions, or INCs, who reach out to new immigrants in our communities through regular house visits, and encourage them to take part in grassroots activities and community work. I understand that the People's Association provides adequate funding support for the INCs. Grassroots organisations can also do their part.

9. Many new Singaporeans are also doing their part to integrate into Singapore. Some take part in activities and share their integration experiences with other new Singaporeans in immigrant associations such as 天府会 (Tianfu Club), 厦门公会 (Amoy Association) and 晋江会馆 (Chin Kang Huay Kuan). Some new citizens also do their part for the local community too. For example, Ms Umayal Lakshmanan, who came to Singapore in 1999 from India and became a new citizen in April last year, reads to children at the Hong Kah North Community Club.

National Integration Council

10. Efforts on integration initiated by community organisations are encouraging. But there is scope for the public sector, the private sector and the people sector to work more closely together in a systematic and coordinated way. To this end, a National Integration Council, or NIC, will be set up. The NIC will comprise key representatives from the public, private and people sectors to drive the integration agenda forward through a concerted effort. Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS), will chair the NIC and will give more details in his speech.

SUPPORT FOR FAMILY FORMATION

11. The Government will continue to encourage and support Singaporeans to have more babies. We will monitor the trends and assess the effectiveness of the enhanced marriage and parenthood package announced last August. It is therefore too soon to review the package. Although the current economic crisis may cause some to think carefully about having children, I hope they do not put off their decision until the good times return. Our total fertility rate in 2008 is still low, at 1.29, unchanged from that in 2007.

ENGAGING OVERSEAS SINGAPOREANS

12. Even as we make Singapore a better place for families and help immigrants integrate into our society, we should not forget the more than 150,000 Singaporeans overseas. In this economic climate, Overseas Singaporeans are anxious about how Singapore is coping and their own job security. We will continue to engage them and keep them informed of what is happening back home through platforms such as Singapore Day. Our next Singapore Day will be held in London on 25 April this year.

ROUND-UP

13. Mr Speaker, Sir. Singapore is facing tough times now. But the problem will blow over one day. Our society is stable and we have the resources to help Singaporeans overcome this crisis. I have no doubt that Singaporeans have the grit and determination to ride this out. The key to our success is our people – a people made up of Singaporeans who are citizens by birth or by choice; of Singaporeans living here and overseas; and of Singaporeans from this generation and the future generations. It is during challenging times that Singapore needs to continue to have a sustainable, cohesive and integrated population. I am confident that we will be able to overcome our current problems and emerge stronger after this economic storm, especially when we face the challenges together as one united people.