

CLOSING SPEECH BY DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER, COORDINATING MINISTER FOR NATIONAL SECURITY AND MINISTER FOR HOME AFFAIRS MR TEO CHEE HEAN AT THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE ON THE POPULATION WHITE PAPER ON 8 FEBRUARY 2013 (FRIDAY)

It has been an intense five days. Seldom have I seen Members on both sides of the house rise and speak with so much passion. Over the past five days, we have heard more than 70 Members share their views, concerns, and suggestions on this important issue of population. This is the longest debate we have had on any single Motion in Parliament in my memory. And so it should be. It reflects the importance that Members have placed on the far-reaching implications of our population challenge, as well as Members' concerns about resolving the current issues facing Singaporeans today.

A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore

In preparing this White Paper, we had set out the considerations and roadmap for achieving our objective of "A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore".

At the core of our population challenge is our aging population. This is happening at a scale and a speed that is unprecedented, as the Baby Boomer cohorts of the 1950s and 1960s turn 65. By 2030, 900,000 Singaporeans, or a quarter of our population, would have crossed the 65 year-old mark. This is a one-time occurrence for us, and will never repeat itself. After 2030, the bulge will be behind us, and the population of Singaporeans over 65 will stabilize over time.

This has implications for all of us. How will we manage our economy and create good jobs for our young people, while letting our seniors grow old with dignity. How will we ensure a good living environment for Singaporeans.

Finding the Right Balance – No Easy Solutions

Our population challenge is complex and multi-faceted, with many inter-linked parts – raising birth rates, taking care of our ageing population, creating good jobs for Singaporeans, ensuring a good living environment. In drawing up the White Paper, we sought to balance many demands and constraints. There are no simple or easy solutions. And we need to find the right balance.

Keeping Singaporeans at the Heart of All We Do

Madam Speaker, over the past year, as we worked on the White Paper, my mind could not help returning to my daily experiences as a Member of Parliament, and what this means for my constituents in Pasir Ris.

I have been in this House for more than 20 years, with more than 16 of them

representing my constituents in Pasir Ris.

16 years ago, Pasir Ris was a young town. There were babies and prams wherever one went. We faced the challenges that new towns today face – child-care and kindergarten places close to home; enrolment in primary schools of choice. About six months ago, I met a young lady now in secondary school. She happily showed me a photo of her being presented a prize by me at a baby show. We both looked younger then.

Now, just 16 years later, whenever I visit a food centre, market or neighbourhood centre. Or attend a block party or some other event, I meet at least one or two senior residents, some of whom I've known for some years, on wheelchairs. I feel a little sad for them, but on the other hand, I am also heartened because they are out and about, able to take part in community life, and keeping active with their neighbours and their friends. Our lift upgrading and barrier-free access programmes allow them to come out, on their own, or with their families or care-givers, instead of being confined at home.

I visited a resident last week, I've known him for a long time, just two days before this debate started. Let's call him Mr B. Mr B has had a difficult year. He lost one leg. But he's got a positive attitude to life. He's happy because he's right-sizing from his current flat to a new studio apartment in familiar surroundings in Pasir Ris, which will be completed later this year. He will live in a smaller flat which he can manage him, and has unlocked some money from the sale of his larger flat for his living expenses. And he continues to volunteer regularly, taking a wheelchair-friendly public bus to the church in Pasir Ris.

Two weeks ago, I visited the Apex Harmony Lodge for dementia patients in Pasir Ris, of which I am the patron. Mr G is one of the 198 residents there. There are another 22 on day care.

For the 198 residents, there are 110 staff. 80% are nursing and support care staff, and of these, 80% are non-Singaporeans. The other 20% are administrative staff or support staff, and are all Singaporeans.

Apex Harmony Lodge is the only facility in Singapore, admitting only people with dementia. The nurses, who are very professional, in consultation with family members and allied health staff draw up an individualised care plan. Residents also have activities like dancing, art and games.

The Lodge is now at full capacity. It has plans for extension, to at least double its capacity. It will need more staff, both Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans, to take care of the residents.

Mr G draws wonderful pen-sketches. He gave me this beautiful sketch of the Lodge, but as he gave it to me, he seemed very attached to it. So I wrote a few words to wish him good health, and asked him to keep the sketch safely for me.

Madam Speaker, my constituency is still considered young. It was developed about 20 to 25 years ago.

I think of the seniors and how we can take care of them, and help them stay active, healthy and engaged in the community.

I think of the young lady, now in secondary school who has her life ahead of her. We need to make preparations now, so that she can have an exciting and fulfilling career in Singapore. So that she can be near her parents to be there for them in the same way as they are there for her today. So that she can have the support she needs to help care for them, and her own family and children too.

So, Madam Speaker, it is with families and Singaporeans like this, all over Singapore, in mind that we debate this key population issue.

Members' Concerns Encapsulated in Amended Motion

Members will agree with me that it has been a good, passionate debate. As Members debated the roadmap for the future, they also raised important concerns, reflecting the views of Singaporeans and the issues they face today.

The Marriage & Parenthood package was widely welcomed by Singaporeans and Members of this House. We will continue to study and consider all good ideas.

Members from both sides of the House asked for greater clarity and assurances that the population range for 2030 was not a population target, but was only to be used for infrastructure planning.

They called upon the Government to give priority to addressing the current bottlenecks, implement the long-term infrastructure plans, and ensure that the benefits flow to Singaporeans. They also asked Government to carry out a medium-term review of our population policies and assumptions.

These are all important and useful points, which reflect the views and interests of our colleagues in this House, and of Singaporeans. Therefore, I welcome their addition, via an amendment from Mr Liang Eng Hwa, to the Motion. These additional points in the amendment indeed are in line with the intent of the Government, and help to clarify this intent, and reassure Singaporeans that discussion and conversation have to continue.

Madam Speaker, we have spent the last five days discussing this issue of population in Parliament. In a moment, we will vote on the amended Motion. Madam, I had asked the Clerk to distribute copies of the amended Motion for Members during tea break, and invite Members to refer to this sheet now.

Madam Speaker, what are we voting on today?

First, the motion as amended: “supports maintaining a strong Singaporean core by encouraging more Singaporeans to get married and have children, supplemented by a calibrated pace of immigration to prevent the citizen population from shrinking.”

Members from both sides of the House agree to this in principle. We agree on the number of PRs to be taken in per year. It's been significantly lower since 2009. We differ on the number of new citizens, but we agree to this in principle.

Second, the motion calls on the government to attend to the current concerns of Singaporeans to:

- place priority on resolving current strains on the infrastructure, particularly in transport; and

- ensure that the benefits of our population policies, such as better job opportunities and salaries, flow to Singaporeans.

And I think we all agree with this and this is the Government's position.

Third, up to 2020, the White Paper *is proposing a major shift* – a significant slow-down in our rate of workforce and population growth, and GDP growth, compared to the path that we were on. This is a carefully balanced path between two extremes – neither carrying on with the rapid growth rates of the last three decades which would take us beyond our capacity; nor having a freeze which would stall the economy, and be harmful to Singaporeans. Hence, supporting the motion is supporting making this significant shift, but in a balanced way, and signals that we should not take either extreme.

Fourth, *beyond 2020, we are not deciding now on any specific population size*. The amended motion from Mr Liang makes clear that the the population projections beyond 2020 are for the purpose of land use and infrastructure planning, and not a population target. And the motion calls for the government to

plan, invest in, and implement infrastructure development ahead of demand. Major infrastructure takes years to build, and once built will be there for decades. Preparing the infrastructure ahead of time, ahead of demand provides Singaporeans with more options in the future. Under-providing will give Singaporeans less flexibility in the future, and risks facing the sort of bottlenecks that we are facing today when plans are not properly aligned.

Fifth, and finally, the motion calls on the government to carry out medium-term reviews of our population policies and assumptions to take into account the changing needs of Singapore and Singaporeans, as well as changing domestic and external circumstances. The Prime Minister has said that we should carry out this review before 2020.

Hence, voting for the motion does not mean that the conversation stops. The conversation continues. And so it should. The conversation on population did not start this week, in this House. It started slowly but earnestly, about a year ago, when we started consulting Singaporeans of all ages, from different walks of life.

Similarly, the conversation does not end in this room today. The end of this Debate does not mark the end of the discussion on this very important issue. The discussion should, and must continue.

The White Paper and this debate has focused the minds of Singaporeans on this important subject, and painted out the challenges we face with an aging and shrinking population, the scenarios, the consequences and possible pathways. It is a subject which affects all of us.

I would thus like to call on Members to support the amended Motion before you. For those who would like to see more discussion and exploration of more possibilities, there is no need to decide now and say yes or not. I ask you to keep an open mind as the conversation on the future pathway continues. We must continually review our approach and adapt our strategies depending on Singaporeans' changing social and economic needs, and how our domestic and external circumstances change. While always putting the interests of Singaporeans at the heart of everything that we do. The amended motion calls for a medium-term review and for the discussion to continue.

Madam Speaker, I would like to thank all Members for sharing their insights, and debating this motion with such energy and passion, with our focus on building a better future for Singaporeans. With leaders, business and people working together in a concerted manner, I am confident that we can truly have a Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore for many more generations of

Singaporeans to come. Let us all come together to build a better life, a better home and a better future for Singaporeans, now and in the future.

Madam Speaker, may I take the opportunity to wish all those celebrating the new year, a bountiful year ahead. Madam Speaker, I support the amended motion.