

Better integration vital as immigration is crucial for economy: Jeffrey Siow

Amid an 'abysmal' fertility rate, newcomers will help Singapore stay dynamic, he says

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Singapore needs to better integrate foreigners to stay open to immigration, which is crucial for the country's economy and society to remain dynamic, said Acting Transport Minister Jeffrey Siow.

This need for immigration comes amid concerning demographic realities such as the Republic's "abysmal" total fertility rate (TFR), which hit a historic low of 0.97 in 2024, he said.

"But immigration can only go as far as integration allows, and we can only stay open and welcoming to newcomers if we are able to integrate them well," added Mr Siow, who was speaking on a panel at the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) Singapore Perspectives conference on Jan 26.

"We need to do more with integration so that we can do more immigration," he added.

All sides will have to make extra effort on this – newcomers must consciously want to integrate, contribute to the community, abide by norms here, and understand what it means to be Singaporean.

Singaporeans must be open-minded too; they have to accept that the national identity today will evolve and it will take time for newcomers to adapt to local customs and practices, he added.

The Singapore identity is com-

plex and evolving, and has to be "carefully nurtured and managed", said Mr Siow during the panel discussion titled "Navigating Challenges to Social Cohesion" that discussed different ways to improve social cohesion.

Mr Siow, who is also Senior Minister of State for Finance, noted that preserving social cohesion is an unending task for Singapore.

"We need to make newcomers feel Singaporean, and also make Singaporeans feel that newcomers are Singaporean," he said, addressing an audience of more than 1,200 participants, including academics, students and policymakers.

Despite being a young immigrant nation, Singapore has difficulty with this, noted Mr Siow.

"Maybe it's because we don't feel secure enough about what it means to be Singaporean. It is natural to have that attitude in us, and it's also natural that it is harder to forge understanding and trust when newcomers come from much more diverse backgrounds than they used to," he said.

There are currently policies in place to help people build a shared sense of identity, said Mr Siow, pointing to the Housing Board's Ethnic Integration Policy and how places of worship are often situated near each other.

"When you have this deliberate mixing strategy across different groups, there will be differences in perspectives from time to time.



(From left) Ms Shahrany Hassan, founder of local non-profit The Whitehatters; Professor Elaine Ho, Provost's Chair Professor, Department of Geography and Research Leader, Migration and Mobilities Cluster, Asia Research Institute, NUS; Acting Transport Minister Jeffrey Siow; and moderator Razwana Begum, Head, Global Security and Strategy Programme, School of Humanities and Behavioural Sciences, SUSS, during a panel discussion at the Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspectives conference on Jan 26. ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG

Therefore, common spaces must also come together with common conversations," he said.

Some of these common spaces are cultivated through ground-up initiatives, such as Ask Me Anything sessions run by local non-profit The Whitehatters, said its founder Shahrany Hassan.

These sessions, led by facilitators, create a safe space for people to ask uncomfortable questions and gain empathy for others, she said.

"We're not talking about negotiating or compromising their values, but rather coming to a common ground... where you see the other person as a person, and not just a mere statistic or stereotype," said Ms Shahrany.

Infectious disease expert Paul Tambyah, who is also the chairman of the Singapore Democratic Party, asked Mr Siow if immigration policy could be tweaked to encourage the immigration of people with strong personal ties to Singapore, instead of following racial quotas.

Mr Siow said current policy already takes into account such personal ties and is not just based on quotas – it relies on the sense that these new immigrants can integrate well.

"And that is a two-way situation where Singaporeans must feel that they have the potential to integrate and can be Singaporean, and at the same time, the person coming in must also make this effort to under-

stand what it means to be Singaporean."

An earlier panel at the same conference discussed whether technology is depleting Singapore's social capital, which refers to interpersonal trust.

Minister of State for Digital Development and Information Jasmin Lau said that the Government was putting in safeguards such as through legislation to ensure that online spaces remain safe for people to interact in.

But she said she remained worried that Singapore's social capital is not growing at a fast enough pace for the country's future needs.

Ms Lau was responding to a question from veteran diplomat Kishore

Mahbubani on whether Singapore is developing more social capital or less as the country becomes more affluent.

"It could be racial tensions, religious tensions, it could be disputes internationally... But eventually, when we have to draw it down, I think we need a lot more than what we're putting into the bank account," she added.

Responding to another question on how government policy intersects with social capital, Ms Lau said social capital is also a key complement to government policy – which tries to cover as many bases as possible – as it fills the gaps and the "last mile" of what people need.

She said: "Sometimes, people do need more than government policies. They do need the labour that helps them take care of the child when they are doing their shift work. They do need someone who can come by and check on the elderly because they're home alone."

Social media has also depleted social capital by amplifying some aspects of social division, said Singapore Management University Professor Lim Sun Sun, who was on the same panel.

When people brandish their wealth or creature comforts for instance, this creates the politics of envy, which can further erode social capital, said Prof Lim.

Both Ms Lau and Prof Lim agreed that building social capital starts with education and understanding of social media platforms and products.

Through education, individuals know that they are not completely in control of what they see and do online, said Prof Lim.

"I don't have that faith that technology companies will suddenly come round to this idea that they will be altruistic and give people what it will take to build social capital," she said.

"But I do have more faith in our own people and our own humans, to be able to look and discern what is useful and what is not."

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