

Singaporeans need to choose...

What they want to change

By **MATTHIAS CHEW**

SOME went straight into the areas where they wanted change, such as policies on immigration, housing and heritage. Others asked if there would be radical changes – or if any change would be made at all.

At two separate forums held last night, young Singaporeans homed in on the national conversation that the Government is seeking to start, to get citizens to help shape the nation's future.

But there were as many questions as there were suggested answers at the two forums, which had more than 200 youths discussing Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's National Day Rally with ministers and MPs.

At the Singapore Management University, Acting Minister for Manpower and Senior Minister of State for National Development Tan Chuan-Jin faced some scepticism about the review of policies, but he explained that the Government had to balance public consultation with the need to make a decision. "There are a lot of different views out there," he told about 100 students. "A lot of it is about building platforms to make people realise that."

At the other session organised by the People's Association, many of the 140 youths – including students and young adults – talked about policies and approaches they wanted to see reviewed.

These included immigration policies, the falling fertility

rate, the education system and social integration. Their discussions were led by young MPs Janil Puthuchery, Tin Pei Ling, Desmond Lee and Intan Azura Mokhtar.

Immigration was one of the more controversial issues, with some participants divided over the need for new citizens and foreigners to keep Singapore economically competitive, and addressing unease over tensions.

Mr Tan acknowledged that some policies could be relooked, but also suggested that some things had to stay, such as the need to grow the economy to keep creating jobs.

"You don't want to rock the boat unnecessarily, just for change's sake," he said.

At the same time, he noted,

the Government had shown it was prepared to change long-standing policies, such as with the pre-school sector.

He also pointed to the enhanced engagement process itself as an example of change. "It's very silly not to tap on that collective wisdom out there," he said.

Indeed, many of the participants spoke about the need for Singaporeans to play a more active role as citizens.

The level of engagement with national issues pleased MP Mr Lee.

"This is affirmation that we're healthy," he said. "We don't have the typical youth that we say are Singaporean youths, who are disengaged or care less about Singapore."

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How they want to behave

By **PHUA MEI PIN**

THE decision is up to Singaporeans to make, not the Government, on the kind of society they want, and the way they behave towards foreigners.

This was the message from Mr Tan Chuan-Jin, Acting Manpower Minister and Senior Minister of State for National Development, last night when young Singaporeans raised xenophobia and ungraciousness as top issues on their minds.

"All of you here have choices to make. Do you want to be consumed by hate, anger, unhappiness? Or do you want to say, let's do something positive," he said.

Xenophobia and graciousness had been key points of Prime Minister Lee Hsien

Loong's National Day Rally speech on Sunday, when he called on Singaporeans to acknowledge the good in foreigners in the country, and to show more graciousness towards others.

At two separate youth forums last night, it became apparent that Singaporeans remain divided on the matter.

At Mr Tan's dialogue with about 100 Singapore Management University (SMU) students, some locals spoke up for their foreign friends, saying some are having a hard time finding a job in Singapore after graduating, while others continued to express discomfort with the competition they face from foreign students.

Separately, at a People's Association forum where immigration was a hot topic, several

pointed out the good they do for the country's economy.

National University of Singapore undergraduate Tan Pei En highlighted the need to show appreciation for all groups who contribute to society, including low-wage foreign workers.

Said the 20-year-old: "Instead of stereotyping them, understand them better. We appreciate teachers, nurses – what about foreign workers?"

The minister acknowledged during his dialogue that some anti-foreigner reactions were sparked by the surge in their numbers in recent years, but assured the students that the Government's priority was to place Singaporeans at the core of the workforce. "There has been an impact and we need to calibrate," he said.

But he questioned if the situ-

ation gives Singaporeans the licence to behave ungraciously towards foreigners.

He also cautioned them to choose their reaction based on fact, not perception. For instance, there is a perception that firms prefer foreign workers when in fact, employers in certain sectors cannot find Singaporeans to do the work.

While the Government can manage manpower policies, only Singaporeans can decide how they would react as individuals.

"It's a free country, you can do what you want," he said.

"The collective character and values cannot be decided by the Government... Eventually, all our individual choices make up who we are as a community."

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