

A promised review of the Population White Paper is due before 2020 but in terms of fallout, it need not be *deja vu*.

# Getting better at discussing population issues



BY  
INVITATION

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IT HAS been two years since the Government released the Population White Paper. Singaporeans would remember the anxiety and angst its projections provoked.

It is understandable to want to avoid revisiting the population debate, especially in the year Singapore celebrates its Golden Jubilee. But this is also a year to ask questions on the country's future, the kind of society that Singaporeans want, and how the city-state can remain a place that citizens are proud to call home.

These questions should drive population policies, which have significant impact on Singaporeans' way of life and quality of life.

In the parliamentary debate in February 2013, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong indicated that the Population White Paper will be reviewed nearer to 2020. This means there are less than five years left to conduct studies or implement and evaluate initiatives to inform the review. And to engage the public.

The review of the White Paper is critical because population policies have many consequences. So, it is timely to reflect on some questions.

How has the Government responded to the reactions to the White Paper? What could have been done better in public communication, and how can it be improved? Can Singapore review its population challenges constructively, in order to tackle them effectively?

## Adaptive responses

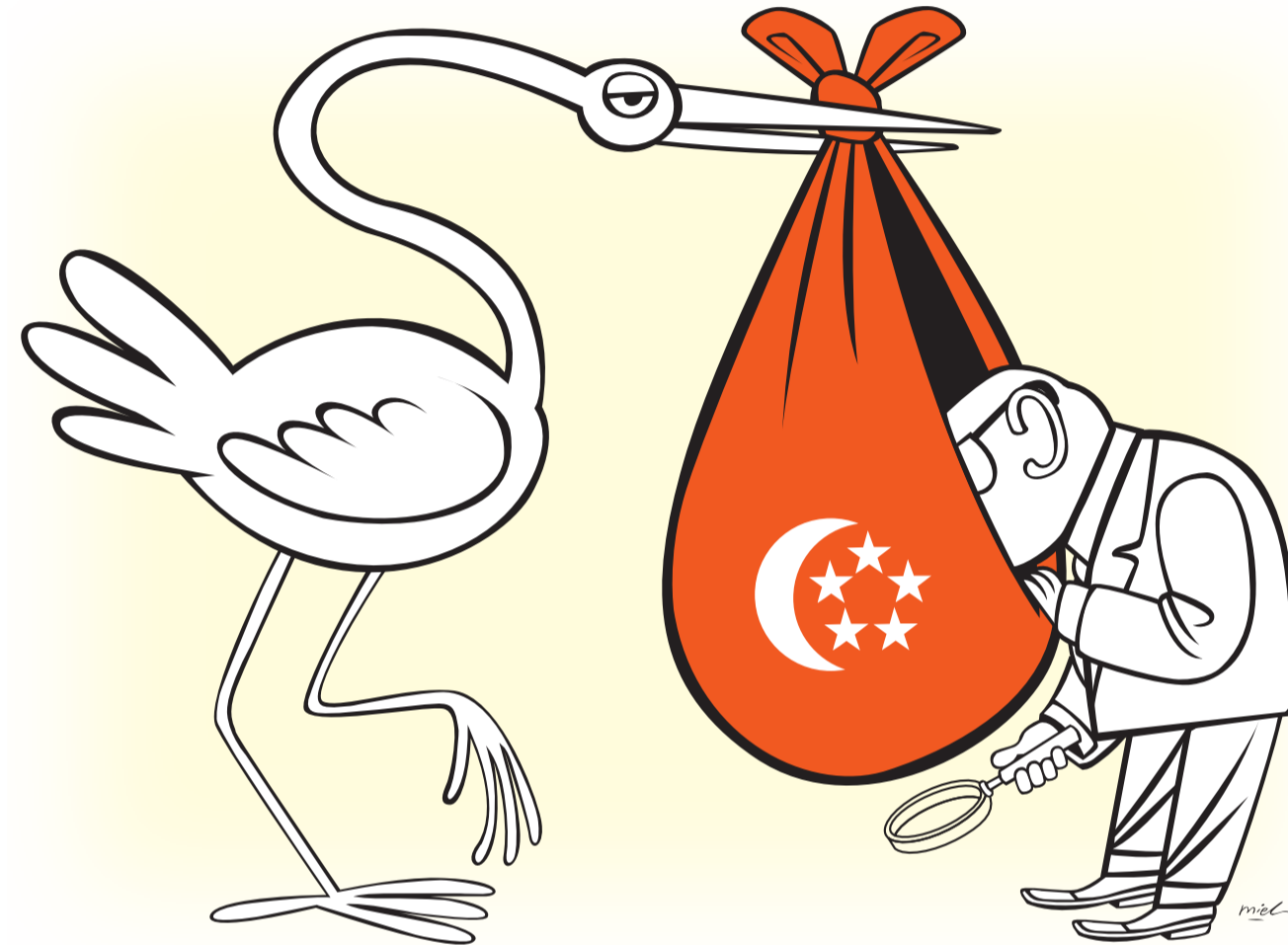
THE strong negative public emotions experienced and expressed since the release of the Population White Paper did yield much good.

First, the demographic challenges were made clearer in policy deliberations and public discourse.

Second, many deeper issues were raised. Examples include sustainable economic models, urban planning, manpower management, fair employment practices, social mobility, and social cohesion.

Overall, the Government responded swiftly and adaptively to the public reactions and the deeper issues. There were investments in improving infrastructure, economic restructuring, tightening of foreigner inflow, and steps to assist more Singaporeans and raise social mobility.

It is easy to label these responses as populist because of the large



expenditures involved.

Indeed, it would have been populist had the policy responses been simply pandering to prevailing public sentiments without regard to their quality and sustainability.

But the citizen-centric actions were also principled – directed at the pain points but guided by meritocracy, fairness, accountability and pragmatism.

For example, the inflow of foreign manpower was tightened by slowing the growth rather than turning off the tap. Housing supply was dramatically ramped up, but housing policies were adapted in stages to calibrate the impact on demand and property prices.

The Fair Consideration Framework ensures citizens are aware of job vacancies and signals the importance of fair employment practices. It does not mandate hiring Singaporeans in ways that go against meritocracy. University places for Singaporeans were increased, but scholarships for foreign students were not done away with.

Rather than labelling them as populist, it is fairer to see post-Population White Paper initiatives as sustained and sustainable principled efforts to develop the Singaporean core.

But it is probably fair to say that the strong reactions to the White Paper had fuelled the

urgency and creativity underlying many citizen-centric policies.

## Strategic communications

INADEQUATE public communications contributed to part of the negative reactions to the White Paper.

The Government has acknowledged that communications should have begun much earlier – to engage Singaporeans on the demographic challenges. And the importance of Singapore staying open could have been discussed more effectively.

But there is also the issue of strategic communications. This is not about using the right words or framing issues in simple language. It involves judgments on how to integrate public discussions and policy announcements.

Take, for example, the announcement of the Land Use Plan, two days after the release of the Population White Paper.

There were many ideas in the Land Use Plan on optimising land use to support a range of population sizes and ensure a high quality of life. These could have generated discussions on how Singapore can be highly liveable, as both a city and a country. Such discussions did not occur. The debate was fixated at the 6.9 million population figure in the White Paper.

Negative reactions came fast

and furious. Several ministers took pains to explain that 6.9 million was the upper limit of a range of population projections by 2030 needed for planning infrastructure, and not a target to achieve.

But confusion continued in public debates. Are the population figures hypothetical situations, plausible possibilities, best-versus worst-case scenarios, planning parameters or population targets? And what do all these terms mean?

Releasing the White Paper prior to the Land Use Plan resulted in a negative outcome. For the public and even Members of Parliament debating the White Paper, the unexpected population projection numbers evoked more than a negative reaction. The numbers activated what behavioural scientists call a prevention focus.

In prevention focus, one's thoughts and feelings are focused on preventing adverse consequences, such as those that easily come to mind when thinking of a large and rapid population growth.

The public attention was fixated on the negative outcomes of population growth. No attention was given to the ideas and opportunities for a good quality of life from optimal land use.

A strategic approach would have, prior to releasing a Population White Paper, presented a draft general development plan

for public discussion on land use and liveability.

The plan would focus on ways to ensure a good quality of life in high-density living. This would allow various ideas on land use to receive a fair hearing in terms of constraints, opportunities, innovations and implications.

At the same time, the country's demographic challenges, including issues of local-foreigner relations, could have been raised and honestly discussed at the then ongoing National Conversation.

The Population White Paper would be formulated and refined based on inputs from the public discussions on land use and demographic challenges. The release of the White Paper would occur after the National Conversation exercise, rightly so as an outcome of discussions among Singaporeans.

Such a strategic approach would be respectful of the National Conversation exercise, which was to discuss the kind of society that Singaporeans want and reflect on shared core values such as meritocracy, respect for diversity, and social harmony.

It would also be aligned with citizen-centricity in population priorities. This is the idea that Singaporeans' interests, including their concerns and aspirations, should be the driver of population policy, and not the population numbers.

## Challenges, opportunities

IN ADDITION to public communication, policy content can be improved. For example, more attention should be given to the quality of the foreigner inflow, not just the quantity. And too much attention may have been given to the old-age support ratio.

It is important to treat ageing as an asset and not just a liability, with seniors able and willing to contribute economically and socially well beyond the arbitrary cut-off age of 65 years old that represents dependency.

Individuals need to adapt to the environment as they age. But jobs, organisations, urban planning and policies also need to adapt to seniors and the changing population profile. When there is two-way adaptation to changes, ageing can paradoxically increase economic capital and social capital.

So, ageing is part of demographic challenges, but also part of demographic opportunities. The term "ageing problem" should be replaced by the term "ageing issues".

Moving forward, major changes to population policies will have wide-ranging effects on people and society. Which is why the review of the Population White Paper needs to be honest and genuine, taken seriously, and proceed constructively.

This applies to all parties – politicians, academics, public intellectuals, civil society activists, and anyone advocating a position. No one party has a monopoly on wisdom. And in the light of clear contrary evidence, one should have the intellectual honesty and political courage to revise his position.

Singapore's population policies are not inherently flawed. Many economic and social fundamentals in population matters have been taken care of. But policies can certainly be improved to yield more good.

If a whole-of-society approach is adopted, Singaporeans can be confident that population challenges can be tackled. They will have hope that their goals and aspirations can be achieved, and be optimistic that the future will be better. Resilience develops when they recover from adversity and adapt to changes. This positivity mindset among Singaporeans will build psychological capital in Singapore.

When the Population White Paper is reviewed, the debate should not be *deja vu* for Singaporeans. It must not be driven by political correctness or populist concerns. Everyone gains from paying attention to policy content, public communication and psychological capital.

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