

TV FORUM

Traditional family still key: PM Lee

PM understands views of single parenthood advocates, but says pro-marriage policies have worked for Singapore

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SINGAPORE – The traditional family model of married parents having children has worked well for Singapore and should remain the basis of the country’s population policy, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said yesterday.

He acknowledged that some families “operate in a different way”, but stressed that “we should stick to encouraging traditional families”.

The Prime Minister said this during a Channel NewsAsia forum conducted with Education Minister Heng Swee Keat, Members of Parliament Indranee Rajah and Intan Azura Mokhtar, and 50 Singaporeans from different walks of life.

The topic of children came up after several participants suggested that the Government consider looking more favourably at unmarried couples and singles who want to have children by tweaking policies that currently favour married couples.

Fashion designer Jo Soh, 36, who lives with her boyfriend and is open to the idea of having children, spoke up for “diversity to allow for differ-

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Mr Lee Hsien Loong
 PRIME MINISTER



PHOTO ERNEST CHUA

ent lifestyles (in) which you can bring up children.”

She said her friends in their 30s and 40s felt the same level of subsidies does not apply to married couples who are not both working, unmarried couples or to singles who wanted to be parents. Women who stop working after giving birth, for example, receive less childcare subsidies. “We find that current policies seem to penalise anyone who isn’t ... a married working couple,” added Ms Soh.

Agreeing, single mother Adora Doganis said she faced difficulty getting a place of her own. The 25-year-old, who is a mother of one, said she wants to have more children but does not intend to marry.

Mr Lee replied that National Development Minister Khaw Boon Wan is now studying the issue of Housing and Development Board flats for singles.

In a poll of the 50 participants held during the dialogue, 46 per cent answered “yes” to the question, “should non-married couples have children”.

Mr Lee expressed surprise at the result, but said he understood both points of view. However, he added: “In Singapore, the norm has been you get married first and you have children afterwards. You may or may not stay married and you may be divorced, something happens — but try and have a husband and wife take care of their kid.

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Using Scandinavia as a counterpoint, Mr Lee said although birth rates are higher there than in Singapore, many babies are born outside of marriage. It works for the society there, but many Singaporeans would disagree, he said.

The Prime Minister added that Singapore society is changing and norms will evolve. “We can’t prevent

it from changing but we also don’t want it to just go wherever the latest fashion is.”

Ms Indranee, who will become Senior Minister of State (Law and Education) from Nov 1, said the Government’s intention is not to penalise unmarried people but to “help those who got married and therefore are looking at additional expenses”.

“It’s not meant to be a penalty but, at the same time, because Singapore is evolving we can examine and see how it’s going and what we can do as we move as a society,” she said.

Other participants had suggestions to boost the fertility rate: Mr Stephen Yee, an Assistant Director at the Singapore National Employers Federation, felt the Government could facilitate the adoption of children by couples who have tried but failed to conceive.

Psychology Professor David Chan of the Singapore Management University suggested that even as the Government waits for attitudes towards having children to change, it could improve national well-being and family time. For instance, rooftop gardens could provide jobs close to people’s homes, provide flexible hours and promote community bonding among neighbours.

Lasting 90 minutes, the session titled “A Conversation with PM Lee” covered the country’s future and values, its fertility rate and pre-school education.



**VIDEO
 A CONVERSATION
 WITH PM LEE
 IN TV FORUM**

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