

COMMENTARY

Rallying the family as the cornerstone of the refreshed Singaporean dream

While the country has to accept its low fertility rate and reshape its gender norms, a purposeful, robust immigration policy also has to be a part of its population strategy. BY EUGENE KB TAN

SINGAPORE'S population policy was writ large in Prime Minister Lawrence Wong's maiden National Day Rally on Aug 18. Tellingly, the words "population" or "immigration" were not mentioned in his speech.

But the policy changes that he heralded for the economy, housing and education revolved around the families, the renewed social compact, and the refreshed Singaporean dream. Confidence about Singapore's future is their common ground.

Such confidence ultimately has to be grounded in the young and not-so-young alike, being optimistic that Singapore has an unbounded future and a thriving population at ease with the direction of travel in sustaining the country politically and economically with the requisite socio-cultural vigour and verve.

In such a scenario, the middle ground remains intact. Holding the centre together amid troubling times is necessary if Singapore is to remain relevant and thrive.

In short, every Singaporean matters. But will there be enough citizens in the years ahead to sustain families, the social compact and the Singapore dream?

Changing tack to climb out of a demographic cliff

Singapore's resident total fertility rate (TFR) – the average number of children a female has in her lifetime – has been on a gradual decline for about 40 years.

Worryingly, the TFR dropped below 1.0 to 0.97 for the first time last year, declining further from the lows of 1.04 in 2022 and 1.12 in 2021. (Demographers generally regard a TFR of 2.1 as – absent net migration – necessary for maintaining a steady population.)

Sub-replacement fertility is ultra-low, despite aggressive and generous parenthood measures. Direct government policies, such as tax breaks and Baby Bonuses, to incentivise childbearing are long-time staples.

But PM Wong acknowledged at



For now, expect more family-friendly and child-friendly policies focused on the health, education, well-being and life chances of our children. Every Singaporean child is precious, and our laws and policies must be unequivocal about that. PHOTO: KEZIA LEVIANNE KOO, BT

his first press conference with local media on Aug 23 that marriage and parenthood are deeply personal choices.

The government is changing tack. The emphasis is now on making Singapore more family-friendly, with enhanced parental leave, child care affordability and accessibility, and financial help for large families.

From Apr 1, 2025, it will be mandatory for employers to provide four weeks of paternity leave. In addition, in a two-step implementation, there will be 10 additional weeks of shared parental leave from Apr 1, 2026. Parents will then have 30 weeks of paid leave between them.

PM Wong described these changes as "building a Singapore made for families" through "a good balance" between working and parenting responsibilities.

The crucial question is whether working parents will be able to take advantage of these policies without fear that doing so will prejudice their job prospects, to the point that they feel pressured into not fully consuming their leave entitlements.

The other key measure is to ensure expenses on full-day childcare in government-supported preschools are affordable as that in primary school. PM Wong announced that such expenses for dual-income families would come to about S\$300 a month. For the less well-off, additional subsidies could bring childcare expenses to as low as S\$3 a month.

These changes join other recent indirect measures such as improved public housing priority and affordability for married couples, the promoting of flexible work arrangements, and the provision of

more aid for assisted reproduction.

PM Wong reiterated that mindsets must change alongside policy changes. One such view is that "fathers should be the exclusive breadwinners, and mothers, the main caregivers".

He reasoned that it was not possible for women to pursue their goals, with every opportunity to excel in their careers, and yet carry a heavier share of caregiving and housework.

The bottom line is that "fathers must play a bigger role" at home. To this end, the shared parental leave seeks to provide couples with agency and autonomy to decide how best to structure their leave based on their household circumstances and needs.

In April 2013, when the law providing for paternity and shared parental leave was first introduced, I

had suggested in Parliament that we consider moving away from unique leave schemes for mothers and fathers towards a broader understanding of shared parental leave.

I proposed that the government allow a couple to decide how to divide the 17 weeks of leave (then comprising 16 weeks of maternity leave and one week of paternity leave) between them.

How leave schemes are packaged can subtly shape whether fertility decisions and childcare responsibilities are the shared preserve of a couple. A paternalistic approach will not aid us in trying to engender a pro-family environment.

We can draw inspiration from the Women's Charter which was, and remains, remarkably innovative and inspirational as when it was first enacted into law in September 1961.

Section 46(1) of the Act states that "... the husband and the wife shall be mutually bound to co-operate with each other in safeguarding the interests of the union and in caring and providing for the children". Section 46(4) reinforces the theme of equality in marriage: "The husband and the wife shall have equal rights in the running of the matrimonial household".

Immigration still a national imperative

The concerted move to create a more family-friendly Singapore does not dispense with the need for a purposeful and robust immigration policy in our overall population strategy. They must go hand in hand.

So long as Singapore needs immigration, this must be balanced by a determined effort to address the ultra-low TFR. In turn, this helps make the overall population policy politically sustainable.

In his Aug 23 press conference, PM Wong reiterated that "we must remain an open society". Earlier this year, his predecessor Lee Hsien Loong said that managing the "inherent tensions" between

social cohesion and immigration was the most difficult issue he had to deal with during his 20 years as prime minister.

PM Wong stressed that even as numbers are controlled, immigrants must be prepared to embrace Singaporean values and way of life and observe the house rules. In turn, Singaporeans must be "big-hearted, gracious, generous and welcome them as part of the Singapore family".

Simply put, integration must proceed apace as a two-way street, in tandem with "our ethos as a society of immigrants".

Explicit fertility policies might not be the most influential in raising Singapore's TFR and population. There is now a keener focus on attitudes and mindsets, which are notoriously difficult to shift as behavioural norms are often deeply ingrained.

One example in the Singapore context is that small families of one or two children are the norm, and that larger-size families, the aberrations.

Moreover, more fertility-challenging is the complex combination of sticky gender norms, intensive parenting and the copious pressure on children to excel in school. This does not even raise the point, as PM Wong put it, about our being in "a world with a whole range of external threats", which can be a fertility dampener.

It will be a few more years at least before these latest moves will have their intended outcomes of an improved TFR riding on the back of gender norms that promote shared responsibility in all aspects of raising a family.

For now, expect more family-friendly and child-friendly policies focused on the health, education, well-being and life chances of our children. Every Singaporean child is precious, and our laws and policies must be unequivocal about that.

The harsh reality is that Singapore must adapt to low fertility and ensure that the country remains a strong proposition for prospective immigrants.

A "Singapore where we realise our dreams" requires Singaporeans and external stakeholders to have confidence in the nation's future. There is simply no alternative to that.

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