

# S'pore grapples with low birth rate, integration

All eyes on new National Population and Talent Division to come up with policies

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SINGAPORE — Despite several measures in the past aimed at addressing Singapore's low fertility rate, 2010 saw the birth rate continue to decline.

Some 31,500 babies were born between January and October.

That is a drop of 3.5 per cent compared with the same period last year, when 32,630 babies were born.

The number of births to Singaporean couples saw an even steeper decline — 17,238 babies, down 5.2 per cent from the same period last year.

Faced with a rapidly ageing society, Singapore's leaders have said that the country needs foreigners to maintain economic growth.

And amid ongoing debate over how to further integrate foreigners into society, all eyes are on the new National Population and Talent Division, set up under the leadership of Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng to formulate such policies.

Figures released in the third quarter of this year showed that, for the first time, Singapore's total population crossed the five million mark boosted by the influx of

foreign nationals in past years. However, this year saw the growth of foreign nationals slowing down sharply, partly as a direct result of government policies. But with one-third of the population foreign-born, the challenge for policy-makers is to create enough common ground to bring this diversity together.

Nowhere is that need more clearly seen than at weekly meet-the-people sessions.

At Bukit Batok East, most residents are there to seek financial help.

However, the area's Member of Parliament, Madam Halimah Yacob, says some have also brought up the issue of occasional friction between foreigners and citizens.

By and large, the two groups have learnt to live together.

But Mdm Halimah says integration is not easy.

She believes that one thing that would help is better coordination of policies across ministries.

She hopes the new agency will address this.

Mdm Halimah, who is also deputy secretary-general of the National Trades Union Congress, says one thing the Government has done right is to focus on raising the

productivity of Singaporean workers and bringing in skilled immigrants who can complement the skill sets of Singaporeans.

But she feels more effort must be made to assure Singaporeans that they remain top of the national agenda.

She said: "People do feel that sense of being squeezed out, so it's important that we constantly put emphasis on the fact that these issues are important, that the Government will pay attention to it and that Singaporeans will always be priority."

In September, the Government revealed for the first time the number of applications for permanent residency received and approved.

Mr Wong had said in Parliament that about 132,000 people applied to be PRs. 115,900 applications were processed, of which only half — or about 59,500 — were successful.

Dr Leong Chan Hoong, research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, says such transparency is welcomed.

Said Dr Leong: "Singaporeans who feel they have a stake in this country, who are concerned about the impact of migration, they naturally would like to know how that has changed in the last six months or so. If

they can make it on a more periodic basis, that can actually be very reassuring."

Dr Leong says this is especially important now, as foreigners appear to have become the target of public unhappiness over policies — whether it is rising housing prices or competition in schools.

He agrees with the Government's stand on sharpening the distinction between citizens and non-citizens, noting it could reassure Singaporeans while providing some incentive for PRs to become citizens.

But he cautions that there might be the unintended consequence of hardening the lines between PRs and the citizens.

Similarly, MP Amy Khor notes that even as the authorities continue their engagement efforts, "we should not become xenophobic and drive away foreigners, which will be to our detriment".

Dr Khor also chairs the Government's feedback unit, REACH (Reaching Everyone for Active Citizenry @ Home).

MPs say community integration activities have helped.

For former Chinese national, Mr Jack Wu, integration is also a matter of time. After 14 years, he says Singapore has become home.

## Businessman pleads guilty in \$2.4m bribery case

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SINGAPORE — Over seven years, a businessman paid a former Ikea employee \$2.4 million so the latter would place food orders with his companies.

The amount involved is one of the largest in kickbacks paid to an individual here.

Andrew Tee Fook Boon (picture), 44, pleaded guilty in a district court yesterday to 12 counts of giving bribes to Ikea's former food and beverage manager, Chris Leng Kah Poh.

Court documents said that as Tee's company AT35 Services — a scrap metal and waste material disposal business — was not doing well, he accepted an offer by an associate, Gary Lim Kim Seng, in October 2002 to enter into the food supply business.

Tee was then introduced by Lim to Leng, who had full authority in making decisions relating to the running of Ikea's restaurant.

Leng was offered one-third of any profits earned by AT35 Services if he chose the company as food supplier of the Swedish furniture giant.

While their supplies were priced at competitive rates, the court heard AT35 Services began to charge prices which were significantly higher than the market rate.

Deputy Public Prosecutor (DPP) Ng Yiwen said: "Notwithstanding this, Chris continued to obtain Ikea's food supplies from AT35 Services, at the higher price."

From August 2005, a new business, Food Royale Trading, was set up to take over part of AT35 Services.

Food Royale would supply dry food items and sauces, whilst AT35 Services would continue to supply marinated chicken wings.

DPP Ng added: "Similarly, two-thirds of the gross profit from Food Royale Trading's dealings with Ikea would similarly be divided and shared equally between Gary and the accused. The remaining one-third of the profits would be paid to Chris as a reward as well."



TODAY FILE PHOTO

Between January 2003 and July last year, the businessmen gave Leng money derived from the business dealings with Ikea on 80 occasions.

The conspiracy was uncovered around June last year by Ikea when an internal audit found its restaurant was purchasing food supplies at a price that was significantly higher than the market rate.

Ikea later referred the case to the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau, said DPP Ng.

Tee pleaded guilty to 12 charges yesterday and agreed to have 68 others taken into consideration during sentencing.

His case has been adjourned to Jan 20 for his mitigation plea and the prosecution's submission on sentence to be heard.

Tee faces a fine of up to \$100,000 and/or a jail term of up to five years on each corruption charge.

## Few takers for job of postman

SINGAPORE — Singapore Post (SingPost) is finding it tough to recruit postmen to boost its staff strength.

This could be due to the physically-demanding nature of the job, it said.

With Singapore's economy doing well, SingPost has been seeing a rising attrition rate since the second half of this year.

According to its vice-president of corporate communications, Ms Tay Poh Choo, its attrition rate stood at about 15 per cent in the last two months.

During a recent recruitment drive, out of the 100-odd candidates who attended the job fair, only 10 applied for the postman's position, SingPost said.

Of these, six were suitable when it was looking to fill 20 positions.

SingPost said it will continue with its recruitment and will venture outside of Singapore, to places such as Malaysia, China and the Philippines in order to hire suitable personnel to join the company.

It now has about 1,000 postmen. The average age of postmen currently working is 50.

Meanwhile, do expect delays if you are sending international mail items and packages.

SingPost said the expected delays are due to the recent severe weather conditions in Europe and the United States as well as the year-end festive peak volumes.

SingPost is working with airlines and other postal companies to make sure that the delays are minimised.

Also, additional manpower and staff have been engaged and deployed to help speed up the processing of all inbound and outbound articles and to secure additional airline space.