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 FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

The heart of the immigration debate

THE population debate, like much public discussion on sensitive issues, risks being polarised into false dichotomies.

It is counterproductive to frame the population problem as a contest between population increase and decrease, or pro- and anti-foreigner intake. Or whether increasing the size of the total population (and labour force) is necessary or unnecessary, desirable or undesirable, and even well-intentioned or not.

In this case, the false dichotomies centre on whether the problems of an ageing population should be addressed by raising the total fertility ratio (TFR) or increasing the intake of foreigners.

Regardless of whether anyone thinks an optimal population size should number four, five, six or more million, most of us recognise the need to raise the TFR, and to have foreigners augment the core local workforce for a vibrant economy. People also understand the limits on population growth imposed by infrastructure and understand the importance of maintaining social harmony, and the challenges to integration and resilience from a huge influx of foreigners.

A more fruitful way to debate this is to understand that people not only have rational or hard-headed views on this subject, but also complex and often mixed feelings about it.

There is a risk in Singapore of focusing on the head issues (the rationality) and not attending enough to the heart issues (the emotions).

And yet a rational solution requires policymakers and those engaged in the public debate to take seriously into account the emotions of the people involved – as opposed to treating such emotions as a communication hurdle to be overcome to explain, justify or implement a policy.

Public expressions of concern and even anger must be recognised as legitimate and must not be dismissed or trivialised. For example, anxiety over having too many foreigners needs to be genuinely respected, and addressed sensitively and holistically.

Research shows that people make decisions and act based on a complex interaction of their rationality and emotions. Emotion is not a nuisance that needs eliminating or suppressing when making good decisions and taking effective actions.

The failure to understand or appreciate the origin, nature, intensity and cognitive and behavioural implications of emotions is a sure way to quickly erode trust in our society. It erodes the social compact between ourselves, and between people and government which we as a society have painstakingly developed. Once this erodes, it will be very difficult to restore, if at all possible.

While rational arguments are key to productive debate, workable solutions to Singapore's population challenges require attention to be paid to the psychological processes underlying how people think, feel and behave.

Understanding what drives emotional responses on the immigration issue is critical to serious attempts at representing the problems and searching for solutions. Only then we can provide important starting points for a more principled account of the population challenges and a more effective approach to addressing them.

What, then, are some of these issues that underpin the emotions in this debate? Consider one: the distinction between country and city.

Singapore is a city-state. We could

learn much from other cities and also have much to offer them in terms of city planning and design for sustainable urban living. There is nothing wrong with aspiring to be a world-class city, but we are a country and our people are citizens belonging to a nation and not merely dwellers of a city. Singapore policymakers are leaders of a nation, and they are not just city planners or city governors.

The distinction between country and city has implications for the debate on population planning. For example, New York, London, Tokyo and Beijing are cities and not countries, so they do not have control over inflow of people and population growth in the way that countries do. It may be true that population growth in thriving cities of other countries is indeed "unstoppable" and the city has to adapt to deal with it.

But Singapore, like other countries, can and should proactively plan and control the extent of inflow of people as part of its strategic efforts to serve national interests and enhance citizen well-being. Because citizens perceive the inflow of foreigners as a direct function of policy, as opposed to some uncontrollable urbanisation or natural development of a city, the perceptions of fairness become criti-

cal. Citizens begin to think counterfactually in terms of "what it should have been", "what it could have been" and "what it would have been".

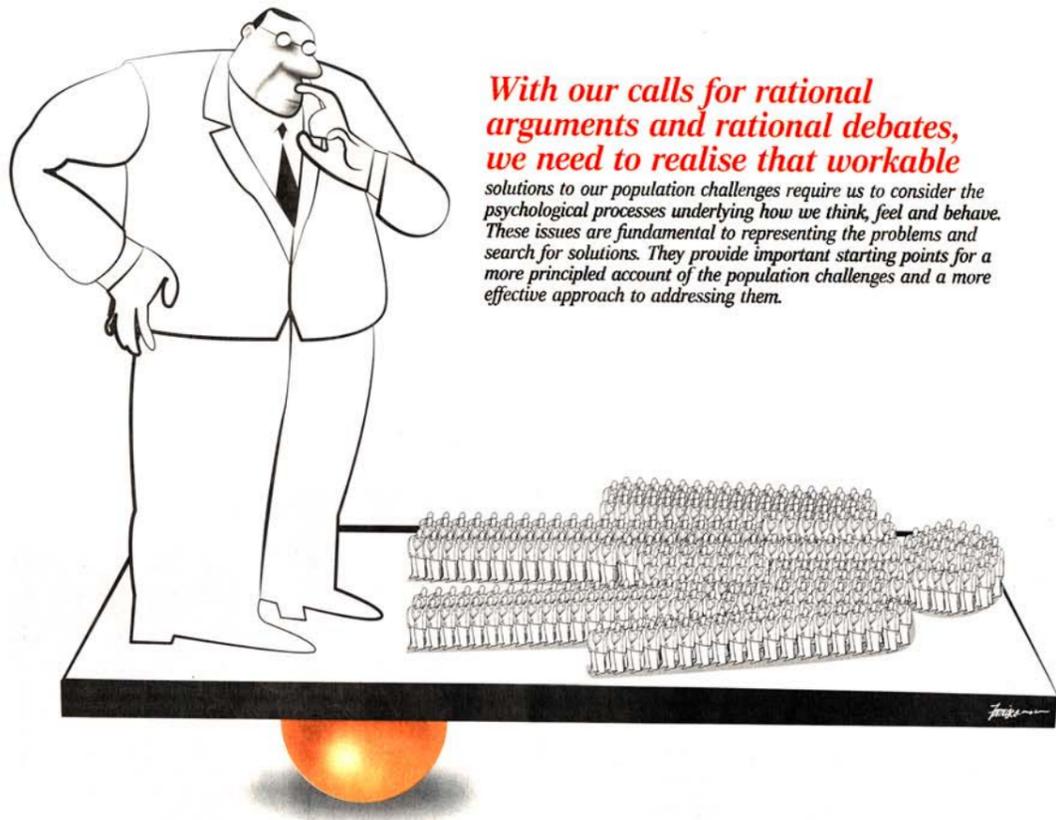
The second implication of this country-city distinction concerns liveability. For a city, it makes sense to construe and measure liveability in terms of its attractiveness to outsiders to move in. But as a country, citizens expect Singapore's liveability to be construed and measured primarily in terms of what Singaporeans think and feel – and how we think and feel affect how we act. Singaporeans can appreciate that ratings of Singapore's liveability given by foreigners in and outside Singapore are important to the extent that they reflect our attractiveness to foreigners and hence ability to increase inflow if we want to.

But we should not be surprised that Singaporeans expect liveability for citizens to be primary and liveability for foreigners to be secondary, although both are important.

Ideally, Singapore's liveability should be high for both groups. Concerns would arise if there was a large gap in liveability ratings between the two groups in either direction. Alarm bells should sound if foreigners' liveability ratings are high or ris-

With our calls for rational arguments and rational debates, we need to realise that workable

solutions to our population challenges require us to consider the psychological processes underlying how we think, feel and behave. These issues are fundamental to representing the problems and search for solutions. They provide important starting points for a more principled account of the population challenges and a more effective approach to addressing them.



ing while at the same time for citizens, the ratings are low or declining. We need to measure and monitor Singapore's liveability for both citizens and foreigners. Liveability for citizens goes beyond physical and material conditions, and includes a holistic assessment of what citizens think and feel about their well-being and quality of life in various domains.

The third and perhaps most important implication of the country-city distinction is that the population debate should start with the question of the kind of society we want as a country. And from this, the desired composition profile of the population.

The population issue is about the outcomes and consequences of various profiles and not about the search for a magical number representing the optimal population size. When we are clear about what we want as a country, we can then examine our current and realistically projected circumstances to work out a desirable and sustainable profile of the population which may change over time.

I hope that what we want as a country will revolve around enhancing the well-being of citizens and fostering an inclusive society. We should establish realistic projected population ranges for city

planning and economy structuring to serve citizens and national interests, instead of targeting to achieve specific population numbers.

Because the projected population ranges are for planning purposes, they need to evolve and respond to unexpected shocks and interrupted growth in the population trajectory. These can be international events affecting inflow from specific groups of foreigners over push and pull factors between their home country and Singapore.

Aside from distinguishing between country and city, we need to examine other critical issues, including distinctions between the abstract macro statistics and people's actual experiences, income inequality and social mobility, in-group and out-group perceptions, and shorter-term and longer-term issues. Clarifying these distinctions will enable a constructive debate on population challenges and help prevent polarisation, groupthink and overconfidence among the various parties in this discussion. We can then be genuine and effective co-creators of Singapore's future.

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