

S'pore unlikely to go Scandinavian way to up fertility rate

By Lee U-Wen

leeuwen@sph.com.sg

@LeeUwenBT

Singapore

WHEN it comes to rolling out generous goodies to try and boost the fertility rate here, Singapore is unlikely to go the way of the Scandinavian countries that have spent heavily over the years and succeeded in having more babies.

During a dialogue session organised by the Singapore Management University (SMU) on Tuesday, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was asked for his views on the perennial problem of young couples not wanting to sacrifice their career progression in order to start a family.

"The Scandinavians have a lot of kids, and they are content to have three-quarters of a career. They work hard but they don't work 12 or 18 hours a day. They finish work at 3pm or 4pm, they fetch their kids from childcare, go home and spend time with them," he said.

"It's a balance, it's a different kind of society and we are not like that. These are choices that we have to make for ourselves," he said during a lively dialogue with a 3,500-strong audience shortly after delivering the SMU Ho Rih Hwa Lecture at the Suntec Convention Centre.

At this point, SMU chairman Ho Kwon Ping commented that the Scandinavians had managed to achieve a higher total fertility rate (TFR) because of the strong government measures and the industrial support for long parental leave.

The prime minister remarked that the Scandinavians have "thrown the kitchen sink" at the problem, be it parental leave of six or 12 months or even longer, baby bonuses, and giving every baby a place in childcare.

This has resulted in the TFR in Scandinavian countries coming in at around 1.6 or 1.7, which is higher than the 1.25 in Singapore. TFR refers to the average number of children born to a woman who completes her

child-bearing years. The replacement rate is 2.1.

When Mr Ho asked if Singapore could one day have similar measures to what the Scandinavians have to raise the TFR, the prime minister replied, to much laughter, that it was possible only if the country was will-

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Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong

ing to accept a higher goods and services tax of 20 per cent to fund the policies.

Mr Lee had earlier reiterated the problem of Singapore's low TFR during his lecture, when he said that the next 25 years would be long enough

for the country's birth trends and the government's marriage and parenthood policies to take root and have an impact.

He explained how the difference between TFRs of 1.2 and 1.5 is equivalent to 9,000 more babies a year, or more than 200,000 over a 25-year pe-

riod. "It can make all the difference to a population. If we can get our TFR up to 1.5, then we can keep our population younger and vibrant. But if our TFR continues to be at 1.2, that will be much harder, even with immigration," said Mr Lee. "A shrinking socie-

ty will be an ageing society, and that will cause profound problems – our economy will be stagnant or declining, and the whole tone of society will be not be young and forward looking, but pessimistic, oriented to the status quo or even looking towards a glorious past, and that's a sad place to be in," he added.

On its part, the government will do more to help Singaporeans marry, have babies and take care of their families. This will be done not just through baby bonuses, but by helping young couples with housing, helping parents with care-giving, promoting flexible work arrangements, and providing affordable and high-quality childcare.

"But these are just policies and the government cannot solve this problem just by policies. It requires all of us to change our norms and culture, for us to be a more family-friendly country. That takes time. We have to start now, and hopefully within 25 years' time, we will be able to benefit from some of the results," said Mr Lee.