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The following is an abridged transcription of the following:

RIMA Colloquium Series

Theme: Foresight or Foreboding: Perspectives of the Impacts of the Population
White Paper

Date: Friday, 15 February 2012

Time: 7.30 pm to 9.30 pm

Venue: AMP Auditorium, 1 Pasir Ris Drive 4, Level 4, Singapore 519457

Speakers:

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Dr Leong Chan Hoong

Senior Research Fellow,
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Dr Daniel Goh

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The session began with the moderator, RIMA's Director, Dr Mohamad Shamsuri Juhari, listing out the salient points relating to the NPTD Population White Paper. He then introduced the panellists to the audience before inviting each one to the rostrum to proceed with their presentations.



Speaker: Professor Tan Ern Ser

- Prof Tan started his talk by linking the White Paper to the **rising age of Singapore's population**. He pointed to the nation's **low-fertility** and described it as the authority's omnipresent current mantra. The low fertility rate is not at the same level as Japan's or Korea's, but "certainly we are not very far behind in terms of the rate at which Singapore society is ageing". He asked: "What will happen if we have a much older population? How will that impact our economy?"



- On the issue of immigration and national identity, he described the government's proposed solution as "immigration and more immigration". The problems inherent in this "solution" are that there will be pressure and competition over space, amenities and infrastructure. He highlighted that even with the current population of 5.3 million, Singaporeans are already feeling the pressure arising from the high cost of living, in particular housing affordability. Adding to this, he cites the erosion

of national identity and core values. “If half of our population consist of foreigners and the other half remains as the so-called Singaporean core, what will happen to our national identity and our core values?”, Prof Tan asked.

- What are the proposed solutions to these problems? The most logical one is to develop and enhance the infrastructure, amenities, and hopefully try to promote integration. “When foreigners come in, we try to get them integrated”, he said. And the next critical point is that “we have to maintain the Singaporean core”. That is what the White Paper highlighted.
- Next, the Prof Tan addressed the critics’ response to the White Paper’s projected rise in population. “I guess the question here is the (projected population of) 6.9 million....we already feel so crowded at 5.3 (million), the question here is can we really handle 6.9 million? I think most would say ‘No!’ - for the simple reason that Singapore is a very small island”. However, he emphasised, “Can we have an ideal population size and composition yet resulting in the economic vision of 2030? I doubt it. I think we still need to top up”.
- In questioning our reliance on foreign immigrants, Prof. Tan pondered whether Singaporeans will one day feel like a minority - “a 2nd class citizen in our own country”. In this context, he rhetorically asked whether there really was a problem in the country that the citizens cannot solve from within themselves. He put forth this challenge: “Can we encourage female labour force participation, encourage senior labour force participation? If we can do that, then do we really need so many immigrants in the next 17 years?”
- When discussing the debate on meritocracy versus inopportunity, Prof Tan referred to his surveys on class stratification conducted in 2001 and 2011. The objective then was to determine the extent to which Singapore was becoming increasingly stratified. Prof Tan described Singapore as “definitely a stratified society”. And he continued by saying, “We are a capitalist society, and we believe in the institutions of private property and inheritance. What exactly is the implication of that? If you are born into a not well-to-do family, you have no

resources and no opportunities, so what is the implication for meritocracy? Meritocracy is about the end-point. If you get merit, you get the award. But the problem is not the end-point; the problem is the start point. If at the starting point, it is not a level-playing field, then what happens? The chances are that people from disadvantaged families will not be able to make it. Having said that, what exactly is the issue? Is the issue about meritocracy or is it an issue of inequality of opportunity? My stand is that it is about the issue of inequality of opportunity. Meritocracy is fine, but inequality of opportunity is the real culprit”.

- To depict the deficiencies of social mobility, Prof Tan applied the term “unequal relative mobility”. He said that if a person comes from a well-to-do family, he or she would have a better chance of achieving a higher status job. If one comes from a not-so-well-to-do family; there is lesser chance that one will achieve success in life. “Even though newspapers tend to focus on rags-to-riches stories, my argument is that while “rags-to-riches” is possible in Singapore, it’s not highly probable, especially when you go down the social ladder. In fact, for most people, that is not likely to happen. Possibility doesn’t mean high probability! It is very hard to ensure equal access to social and cultural capital. We can always give scholarships, bursaries, but the problem is social and cultural capital. If you come from a dysfunctional family, where nobody reads, the TV is on all the time, and your parents never explain things to you, your cultural capital is very low and not helpful in social mobility”, he added.
- In arguing for a broader understanding of meritocratic merit, Prof Tan opined that meritocracy was not a wrong ideal in itself but points out that a broader definition of meritocracy might be required. To him, meritocracy is not about achieving good academic grades per se. There should be other ways of recognizing merits, such as achievements in sports, the arts, and other fields.
- Prof Tan also highlighted the presence of status consciousness in Singapore. However, he sees it to be different from class consciousness “because class consciousness means revolution, it is about exploitation and conflict of interest”. There are no such sentiments among the citizens of Singapore. Though he

agrees that there is an apparent social distance between classes, “The issue is, will there be class envy as a result of status consciousness and the social distance between classes?” This, to him, depends on whether the middle and lower classes feel that there is security and that they have experienced social mobility. “If you feel that you are doing well and that you are able to move up, then, there is no class envy. But if you feel that there is job insecurity, income insecurity, and you are not able to move up socially, then there is class envy”, he said.

- Prof Tan next spoke on meritocracy and the interrelation with democracy. Meritocracy, in Prof Tan’s words, begets elitism. A society therefore needs to perceive the element of democracy in governance “to serve as a check to tell the elites that they are servant-leaders.” This is how democracy serves as a counterbalance to meritocracy.
- With regards to the “sandwiched generation”, Prof Tan said that conceptually, there is no such thing as a sandwiched class. However, he acknowledges the existence of the sandwiched generation which he described as individuals who have to take care of two generations - one’s parents and one’s children. Care for the latter involves supporting them all the way through to university and for the former, support for health care. He wonders if “the sandwiched generation contributed to low fertility, because if there are too many people to take care of, you tend to reduce the number of dependants that you have”. Since job insecurity also affects the middle class, the implication is that there is also a need for them to qualify for assistance and welfare.
- Addressing the insecurities of Singapore’s middle class, Prof Tan put forth the question of whether Singapore can become a more equitable society. He argued that while Singapore cannot be a purely classless society, but it can work towards expanding its middle class and to go about reducing the latter’s feelings of insecurity. “Bringing in more foreigners would be less of an issue if our middle class folks feel secure.”

- According to Prof Tan, it should be physically possible for Singapore to accommodate 6.9 million people. Nevertheless he, like many others, questions its desirability. Unlike many others however, Prof Tan does agree that the projections set out for achieving vision 2030 can still work towards fostering Singapore's national identity instead of eroding it. But this is based on a situation where more low-income Singaporeans are able to move up to join the middle class. Only then will issues such as those centring on ethnicity will not turn into serious problems. However, if a significant minority of Singaporeans feel that they are being left behind, then, he thinks, we can expect some ethnic tension. "Especially if the people who come in are doing better than the minorities we have in our own land."
- In focussing on the debate for the need to get the right balance between the happiness of our citizens and the need for immigration to bring about economic progress, Prof Tan brought to the audience's attention that when talking about well-being, the emphasis has always been on economic factors such as the GDP. However, he also agrees with individuals who argue that we should actually be emphasizing the value happiness. He stressed that while money cannot buy happiness, it is always a necessary condition. In elaborating, he mentions that if immigration functions to ensure that Singaporeans still have jobs, Singapore should be prepared to allow in foreigners. "However, we should only admit those who can contribute and not renew the permits of those who can't."
- Lastly, he asked, "Can we live with little or no economic growth and live a fairly secure life? My answer is that it is hard. Most of us would still want to do better than our parents and to do better than ourselves 10 years ago...Can we return to the golden age of modern Singapore? In my view, the late 70's and the 80's constitute the golden age of Singapore; I believe we can never go back."

Speaker: Dr Leong Chan-Hoong

- Dr Leong centred his talk on what he sees as the “3 F’s” - Feelings, Facts and Framing.



- He began by relating ‘Feelings’ to the White Paper’s projected population figure of 6.9 million in 2030. He told the audience that his impression is that most people think of the ‘6.9 million’ as a “very scary” figure. This

is because a majority of Singaporeans can easily cite a wide range of population issues that they deem as likely to be problematic. Some of the issues already cited include the competition for jobs, scholarships, wage suppression, congestion in the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT), escalating housing prices, “and the list goes on”.

- Dr Leong highlighted that a large number of Singaporeans are blaming these fears on foreigners living in Singapore. He described it as a populist feeling and distinguished these from his next point: Facts.
- The term “facts” was defined by the Dr Leong as “the things that you and I know and the things that we can prove”. The fact is that Singapore is suffering from an ageing population, low fertility as well as a society and business sector that is highly dependent on maids and our foreign workers. Another fact is that 1/3 of PRs gave up their residential status just before their National Service so they can escape it. Some foreigners will also use Singapore as a stepping stone to countries which they think offers them better opportunities. He also highlighted that “there are more people today in the MRT than 10 years ago”, alluding to increasing strains on the infrastructure.
- Next, Dr Leong went on to describe “the most important fact” he wanted to share, which is “Singaporeans are not xenophobic”. “In fact, we are very inclusive,

including Malay-Muslims”, he said. He cited a recent IPS Immigration Survey in which 61% of local-born Singaporeans admitted that immigrants contributed to Singapore as much as Singaporeans do. These local-born Singaporeans further appreciated that 61.5% of immigrants are willing to take up jobs that Singaporeans shun. Dr Leong said that if one compares the survey to similar ones conducted in other countries, Singaporeans appear to be “very open-minded”. But he also acknowledged that “the anger and the fears displayed right now are real”. Singaporeans are unhappy yet, and more importantly, it must be noted that “the resentment is not directed at foreigners, but at the related policies.” Dr Leong went on to the next point by holding that “how and why the White Paper became a lightning rod, is all because of framing”.

- Framing, he said, was about selective attention. The figures, the statistics, the data, the projections were all rational compositions. This, however, was not to suggest “that emotional experience is less important than the facts. The framing based on the current context, Dr Leong argued, gives more emphasis on the feelings “given how divided we are today as a society on public discourses”.
- Elaborating the interplay of both feelings and facts, Dr Leong shared a lesson from history: 48 years ago, Singapore separated from Malaysia. “If we go straight to the facts, that we are a small country, no hinterland, zero natural resources, we would have gone back to Tengku Abdul Rahman and stayed with them (the Malaysians). But we did not stick to the facts alone. The former PM Lee Kuan Yew believed that Singaporeans can pull through a crisis if we put our hearts and souls together. In short, he let his gut feeling take over, and the rest is history”, Dr Leong said.
- He then went on to discuss the policies and politics behind the population forecast. Dr Leong suggested that the projected 6.9 million inhabitants in 2030 is a worst-case scenario. Yet it is difficult to ascertain the accuracy of this as the underlying data has not been made public. With regards to this, he reminded the audience that “even if our policies are based on rational (considerations), politics is (always) emotive”. He asked, “Why didn’t (the government, instead) focus on

solving our immediate problems like the needs of an ageing society, lower productivity, and provisions on healthcare and insurance (and) not on the number of foreigners under the worst case scenario?” He added, “In the late 1960s, Lee Kuan Yew was only interested in ranking up HDB units, attracting foreign investors, providing good education to our children. He was not obsessed with the fact that our new city-state has no hinterland, even though that was and still is a key driving force in shaping our policies today. The discourse in the 1960s centred on changing for the better; on how to bring more good jobs, empower the young and improving the standard of living.”

- Overall, Dr Leong said, the issue was not about people versus people, it was about people versus policies. He concluded, “My main point for tonight is this: if you want to make progress in population discourse, I think we are putting harder on what should be the simpler narrative. Why not have a white paper on social identity and for that matter, why not have a white paper on Singapore social resilience?”

Speaker: Associate Prof Daniel Goh

- Prof Goh began his presentation by explaining that as a comparative historical sociologist, he looks at nation-states - how they formed themselves and how this process subsequently affects their policy formulation. A lot of policies that states have to make are based on very important assumptions that are often hidden or taken for granted. The Population White Paper is one such example. With regards to the formulation of the Paper, he said it did take a little effort to “dig out” these assumptions but they are nevertheless there. In this



instance, he sees three assumptions that are key in the formulation of the White Paper as they lead to important consequences because they imply that the solution must be centred on immigration issues.

- The first assumption, according to Prof Goh, is that Singapore's TFR will not be increasing. He explained that this can be seen with the White Paper projections which stipulated that TFR will remain at 1.2 for Singaporeans and these in turn spell dire consequences for the country. It provides the rationale for the argument of bringing in more new citizens. "Basically, the policy is to bring in 15,000 - 25,000 new citizens (per year) because their expectation is that Singaporeans will not be able to increase the population."
- The second assumption relates to the ageing workforce. The White Paper provides the conclusion that ageing workers will pull down the economy due to their decreasing levels of productivity and innovation. Prof Goh questioned this assumption because he sees today's system as a 'knowledge-based economy'. Such an economic system should crucially benefit from older workers' wisdom and experience. The policy makers' belief that ageing workers will not be able to increase productivity and innovation is important to note because it carries the rationale that if the labour force can no longer increase productivity and labour force participation rate decreases, then the government naturally needs to bring in foreign workers. Prof Goh in fact, makes it specific that the White Paper surfaces the notion that not only do you need to bring in foreign workers to fill the gap, you need to specifically bring in younger people to revitalize the workforce. Thus the very notion of revitalising and making the workforce livelier again is really tied to the perception that senior citizens will no longer be able to contribute. But this is not necessarily the case according to Prof Goh.
- The third assumption lies in the need to meet a 'stretched' productivity target of 2% - 3%. Prof Goh held that such a target actually exceeds that of other mature economies whose normal productivity target rate is 1% - 2%. He noted that it is unlikely that Singapore will be able to fulfil such a challenging target. To achieve it, the country will again have no choice but to bring in more foreign workers. The

White Paper, he cautioned, did not explicitly reveal by how much the country's foreign workforce has grown over the years. He mentioned however, of having made his own calculations which reveal that in proportion to the local population, the non-resident population has been increasing between 2.5% to 3% per year. This, he sees to be a substantial rise.

- Nevertheless, Prof Goh also emphasised that these three assumptions are worst-case scenarios, “being that Singaporeans don’t produce, reproduce...they age...the quality of workforce declines; productivity cannot be achieved”. Nevertheless, he again reminded the audience “that these are the assumptions.” According to him, such negative assumptions indicate the idea “that the state has given up on Singaporeans”. He elaborated, “They’re going to make you try to reproduce by giving you more baby bonus etc, but they are (actually) not really hopeful and confident that you will reproduce. So what they need to do is to bring in more new citizens...I don’t want to say giving up on Singaporeans per se,... but giving up on Singaporean society to solve the problem. I am not sure whether the State still thinks of Singapore as a society, but in Sociology, the state should think of its citizens as a society rather than as individuals...Maybe this contributed to the problem, the State thinks Singapore is made up of individuals that can be socially-engineered to some extent, rather than a society with collective intelligence that can come together to solve problems.”
- “Why does the state in a sense seem to be giving up on Singaporeans?” queried Prof Goh. The first reason has to do with the state being “rather calculative...in terms of finances”. He explained that “We are always talking about financial prudence while many countries around the world are very willing to take risks by going into debt in order to develop their citizens. In Singapore, the state is always concerned about the reserves”. Prof Goh is of the opinion that “In order to solve your problems, you have to do very tough, costly, structured reforms. And these are things like providing institutional support...like the way many of the welfare states in Europe, and Taiwan, Korea and Japan are providing for families”. Next, a government would have to “redesign the workplace for an ageing workforce...This is going to be costly again”, he noted. Prof Goh clarified that these are already

being done in Europe, Taiwan, Korea and Japan. As a result, the productivity (of these countries) is very high because of their ability to re-engineer the workplace and the institutions. A second reason is the economy itself. “We have a problem because our economy is very weak in the middle”, Prof Goh said. “We have a lot of SMEs and quite a number of GLCs that have ties with MNCs, but we don’t have the kind of middle sector” which, to him, are usually the drivers of innovation as seen in Germany, Taiwan, Korea and Japan.

- Prof Goh then raised the issue of whether the Singaporean state is on a path to become more democratic. “When Lee Kuan Yew became Prime Minister, the assumption had been that Singapore was planning for the long term - 30 to 50 years ahead.” Prof Goh said he found it surprising that the White Paper was not planning towards 2050 and instead made projections up to 2030 which is something of “a mid-term review”. To him, one implication to this is that Singapore is becoming more democratic and that the government is no longer made up purely of technocrats but politicians thinking in terms of electoral cycles. What this means is that current PM Lee might be thinking in terms of his two more terms in office. “So he is going to try to achieve the national goals during his term, and it is up to the next government to decide what they want to do”. In Prof Goh’s perception, this is akin to the US presidency’s approach toward its electoral system.
- Yet Prof Goh held that even if the state is becoming more and more democratic, such developments will not extend beyond its technocratic origins. By this, he means to say that the Singaporean state will, as it has previously, attempt to social-engineer the population so as to create a harmonious society. “You see, this social-engineering is based on their belief in their ability to integrate new citizens...but it seems that this belief is lost when it comes to the social-engineering of Singaporeans - the existing Singaporeans. The existing Singaporeans have become a bit too complex, a bit too educated for them”, he said.
- Prof Goh reminded the audience of what was mentioned by Minister Dr Yacob Ibrahim in 2003. According to Dr Yacob then, there are three phases in the build-

up to multiculturalism. The first phase takes place when “everybody comes together, bring the common heritage together and become a Singaporean”. The second phase involves all Singaporeans going “back to our own heritage and have this notion of Singaporean Chinese, Singaporean Malay, Singapore Indian and the Others”. The third phase is when hybridization occurs - taking all the elements from different cultures and bringing them together and sculpting a more cosmopolitan identity. Prof Goh emphasised that “we need to recover and rescue that idea because we kind of forgotten this in our discourse”. He is thankful that Minister Yacob introduced this in 2003 but “the concept didn’t take off because it was a bit too flaky. It needs to have a concrete location”.

- Following this strand of discussion, Prof Goh asked what it means to be a cosmopolitan Singaporean? He said the concept must ultimately be located within the Southeast Asian context which means that “you have to think in terms of the Southeast Asian identity”. For him personally, this means re-discovering himself as a Chinese Singaporean and placing his Nanyang from the South Seas rather than from China, Singapore or Malaysia. In this aspect, his Nanyang is the region encapsulating the Thai-Malay archipelago and further on to Thailand, Burma and Myanmar. This results in the emergence of traits which reflect a kind of cultural hybridity. After reorienting his heritage this way, he began to “discover things that I didn’t know, like one of my great grandmothers is a Peranakan, how my family is spread over to Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines. Now, if people ask me what’s my ethnicity, I say I am Nanyang Chinese”.
- Lastly, Prof Goh pointed out that although we may have all these different cultural attributes and cultural understandings, Singaporeans can still share common ancestries and identities. “These things become important for me. My imagination is not anymore (directed) towards China. It is oriented towards Singapore or to Malaysia, towards the region...which has very rich civilizational history that involves centuries and centuries of mixing. If anything, the Chinese can learn from the Malays because this is a Malay speciality...upgrading the hybridity of this region, this is after all the Malay Archipelago.”

Speaker: Mr Nizam Ismail

- Mr Nizam began his talk by highlighting the White Paper's focus on Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth. He further stated that he will focus particularly on the implications of the White Paper on the Malay/Muslim Community (MMC) in Singapore, reasoning



- that this aspect lacked discussion. Mr Nizam then focussed on the first theme of his presentation: Economics and the White Paper. The White Paper demonstrates that the relationship between the State and Singaporeans is largely defined in economic terms. One key objective of the White Paper is targeted at GDP growth, despite the statements made in Parliament that stated otherwise. Mr Nizam reiterated that GDP growth, to him, is the key driver of the White Paper projections.
- Regarding the Malay/Muslim Community's (MMC) position, Mr Nizam pointed out that "when you think of the position of the MMC, the fact (comes to mind) that we are 10 steps behind other communities when it comes to socio-economic attainment, and this puts the community at risk". He further highlighted that the MMC has the lowest household income and that the income gap between the MMC and other communities has increased in 2010 compared to 2000. "We are overrepresented in the lower-rung jobs. This makes it harder for us to compete in this very economically-driven Singapore, especially with the influx of immigrants. While we were 10 paces behind previously... in 2030, we (will be) 20 paces behind", he said.

- Next, Mr Nizam brought to light the need to address the current trajectory of economic prosperity. He questioned Singapore's relentless pursuit of a largely market-driven economy. He mentioned that "even the way we administer health care in Singapore is market-driven or the way that our public transport is run as a profit enterprise". One fundamental question he asked was whether GDP growth has been translated to actual income growth amongst Singaporeans. He further queried, "When you look at the data over the last 10 years, particularly at lower income workers...if a person earns \$1,000 in 2000, he (only) earns \$1,010 in 2010 on average. That's the extent of growth of low income wage workers. If you look at the inflation, it even makes it harder for lower income families to make ends meet"
- He then began an assessment of the relationship between foreign workers and income growth. Pointing to the influx of foreign workers over the past 10 years, he pointed out that this has had a direct impact in suppressing income growth especially for lower wage workers, amongst which the Malay community is overly represented. Mr Nizam emphasised the need to consider the social and economic implications of the influx of immigrants regardless of the potential value that these people could bring to Singapore. Even in situations involving highly educated Malays, "it makes stiff competition for the Malay graduates, who are already underrepresented, to get (a particular) job. When we talk of meritocracy and unequal opportunity, I think their risk is even higher in a more intensely competitive environment".
- In terms of transparency, Mr Nizam depicted Singapore's immigration policies as "largely opaque". He said that the government's approval criteria for Permanent Residents (PRs) or citizenship applications are not stated explicitly as "there is no need for the authorities to explain the rationale for rejecting the application for PRs or citizenship". This will be "a real issue" if, until 2030, Singapore intends to have a sustained increase in the level of foreigners into the country. He then proceeded to question how this would affect the MMC, given that the MMC has the highest TFR compared to the other communities albeit it being a declining trend. He explained that "the immigration policy is designed to make up for a relative shortfall of the different communities." He went on to highlight the point "that the

state is attracting more immigrants from certain countries, like China, because the TFR of the local Chinese community is less than the other communities. Although that hasn't been articulated, we can sense that to be the trend.”

- The issue, as Mr Nizam elaborated, is that the government's rationale for their immigration policies had not been totally transparent to the public. Going forward, he foresees that there would be great difficulty for the government to uphold its' assurance that the percentage of Malays within Singapore will be maintained and remain unaffected by immigration. Mr Nizam remarked that while the Prime Minister was probably referring to the 15% proportion of Malay citizens agreed upon as the ratio of total Singapore citizens, he failed to spell out implications seen by the decline in size of the community from 13.9% in 2000 to 13.4% in 2010.
- Mr Nizam then proceeded to discuss the implications that immigration posed to the MMC, given that immigration is seen as the key driver in causing the reduction in the ratio of Malay residents in Singapore. Even if there is minimal impact on political standing and influence, the declining ratio of Malay residents in terms of total resident population would bring about social implications for the community. This is especially so given the fact that the migrants, now making up the ever increasing proportion of those living in the country, would not be as sensitized to the cultural nuances of multi-cultural Singapore.
- Mr Nizam then put forward the government's intentions to attract immigrants from neighbouring regions such as Indonesia and Malaysia as set out in the White Paper. However, he cited the Prime Minister expressing his difficulty in getting people from Indonesia to come to Singapore because Indonesia's economy is doing well and they had sufficient job opportunities at home. Mr Nizam, however, did not share the sentiment as he “questioned the sincerity and the effort on the part of the state to attract people from Indonesia”.
- As an example, he proceeded to share the case of an Indonesian student who studied in Singapore since he was in Secondary 3. The student did well in his

studies, went on to attain a Sembawang scholarship, began university studies in Singapore and graduated with an Honours degree. Upon completion of his studies, the individual applied for an Employment Pass several times but his applications were continuously rejected without reason given. Only after getting help from an MP was he successful in getting an Employment Pass. Subsequently, after working for 2 years, the individual then applied for a Permanent Resident (PR) status. Once again his application was rejected without reason. The individual could not help but notice that Malaysian Chinese, Burmese or Filipinos who were his juniors at the time had already obtained their PR status. Mr Nizam emphasised that this is not the only sole incident as “there are many other such cases”.

- To sum up on the topic of immigration, Mr Nizam then reiterated the need for clear immigration criteria to be disclosed to the public. He argued that “when you talk about immigration, it is important for the State to clearly articulate the criteria, like the governments in Australia, Hong Kong...So we know what the basis of the immigration policies is”.
- Mr Nizam then went on to address education as another issue of concern with the White Paper. Stressing that across the board, he asserts that Malays are still lagging behind other communities whether at the PSLE, GCE ‘N’, ‘O’ or ‘A’ levels. Looking at the recent education statistics published a few months ago, he lamented on how some of the gaps are not only persistent, they are in fact, becoming bigger, “and it is a trend”.
- When it comes to studies in the local universities, he said that only 5% – 6% of Malay students from each cohort were eligible for admission. He now foresees how the accelerated pace of immigration in 2030 might aggravate this situation. While he admits that it is not very clear what the immigration policy will then look like in terms of attracting students, he does acknowledge that currently, “We do know for a fact that the state actually run road shows attracting students in certain countries; they (these students) will (then) come here at secondary level and will be fully-funded all the way to NUS”. This means intense competition for Malay

students in getting scholarships, places in universities and subsequently obtaining employment... “It is something that the MMC should be fully aware of”, he warned.

- Mr Nizam also argued that social mobility for the MMC will become “more sagged” in 2030. He said that there will be more competition and that income gaps will be widened even more. “If you look at the trend, the coming in of immigrants has already widened the income gap among Singaporeans. We have the second highest GINI-coefficient globally in developed markets. With the projected influx of immigrants, the GINI - coefficient will become even wider. Thus, social mobility will become the greatest challenge for the community going forward.”
- Mr Nizam added that an issue the White Paper might not have sufficiently addressed is the need to provide stronger social safety nets to make sure that not just the Malays, but all other disadvantaged communities will receive that extra lift to enjoy equal opportunities in Singapore’s meritocratic environment.
- Another important point raised by Mr Nizam is the somewhat hasty approach taken in deliberating the White Paper proposals as it therefore means that there has been a lack of public consultation. He pointed out that there should be a ‘Green Paper’ prepared for public debate before a White Paper was issued in Parliament. “Why didn’t we have that? There is even an existing platform available to reach out to Singaporeans. We have SG Conversation, and Suara Musyawarah to reach out to Malays within the community itself.” Mr Nizam is of the opinion that these existing platforms are under-utilised although they are accessible avenues to engage Singaporeans within the community as well as to seek their feedback and analysis on current issues.
- He emphasized that the White Paper has not addressed “very fundamental issues” like what it means to be Singaporean which relates to the question of the Singaporean identity. The White Paper also failed to surface other relevant issues such as the kind of physical and social space Singaporeans want to live in come the year 2030. Unless made for public discussions, these issues may potentially

whither the Singaporean identity which then becomes the root causes for “the anger that we have seen that’s manifested in the protest in Hong Lim Park”.

- In conclusion, Mr Nizam argued that there are still certain underlying concerns that the White Paper fails to sufficiently address. The central debate is whether Singapore’s progress revolves around “equitable economic growth, increases in productivity or the presence of immigrants. These has implications on our society, particularly for the disadvantaged community.”

Question & Answer Session

Question 1:

Mr Syed Alwi Ahmad sparked off the discussion by bringing to light a few main comments. He first talked about the idea of values and identities in Singapore and how these have changed over the course of many years. He argued that “we should (not) try to freeze ourselves in time, into this static notion of a value that doesn’t change or a notion of a Singapore identity that doesn’t change”. Instead we “should be more dynamic and accepting” of the changes that have occurred in terms of Singaporean values and identities over time. He then further illustrated the concept of change with regards to physical space using the example of the Iskandar Development Region and made similarities to the fact that the “(physical) borders of Singapore might change”.

Relating to this concept of change, he highlighted his concerns over the global and regional economic and political imperatives that the Population White Paper is driven by, and the fact that it fails to take into consideration “the macro-economic picture”. In this light, he voiced his concern at the decrease in Singapore’s role as a ‘middle ground’ for trade between the Eastern and Western economies. As such, he strongly feels that it is incongruent to base any projections aimed at placing Singapore at the same level as Europe, which is economically well-established and are “top producers of patents, inventions and innovations”.

In a final comment somewhat unrelated to the White Paper, he questioned if merely a mindset change is required to eradicate some of the persisting problems that have been long entrenched in the Malay community, or if a radical change is necessary. He pointed to the perceived divide even within the Malay community reflected by the diverging points of view in the different segments of the community. Personally, to prevent 'losing out' to the other ethnic groups because of the Malays' 'less aggressive' nature, Mr Syed Alwi is of the opinion that "if you can't beat them, join them".

Prof Tan Ern Ser echoed the views of Mr Syed Alwi pertaining to the constant changes experienced in Singapore. He added that the idea of change may not necessarily allude to a convergence. Rather, if unmanaged, people can end up being different from each other, "continuous in diversity, with different trajectories".

Mr Nizam Ismail responded by agreeing with Mr Syed's Alwi's point alluding to the increase in competition that might arise from our neighbouring countries but emphasised that the need to increase output cannot be the sole impetus that explains Singapore's stance on pursuing immigration. In fact, he further added that the influx of immigrants might result in the business sector over-relying on cheap foreign labour hence "disincentivising local workers from being productive, creative and innovative". He believes in the notion that improving the productivity and competency of local workers would prove to be a better long-term solution, making Singapore more resilient.

He then addressed Mr Syed Alwi's concern regarding the perceived divide within the Malay community and agreed that "that maybe it's time that we just think of the issues that we face - specifically Malay issues - as real issues that cut across a lot of other disadvantaged communities". He commented that MP Zainal Sapari's suggestion regarding class-based affirmative action should be further debated and discussed. It should not be frowned upon or condemned since in Singapore's context, there are already numerous social



welfare programmes put in place to cater to disadvantaged communities. Mr Nizam thinks that more of these class-based affirmative action programmes will result “in the widening and deepening of the social safety nets”.

Dr Leong Chan Hoong chose to respond to the comment from a macro-economic perspective. He argued that the reason behind Singapore’s constant focus on economic structure is precisely due to the assumption that we lack a hinterland. He nevertheless cited Minister Mentor Lee Kwan Yew saying that our hinterland indeed exists in the form of ASEAN, South East Asia or even Asia as a whole. He drew comparisons between Singapore and the Scandinavian countries such as Sweden and Norway, highlighting the fact that their perception of their hinterland is not confined within their own countries but rather within the continent of Europe itself due to the occurrence of economic integration. These European countries’ economic strengths, he posits, does not stem from the labour inputs of their integrated markets in themselves, but instead from their individual “productivity and innovation”. He thus asserts that we have to aim for these. Dr Leong stresses that the labour input model in which Singapore bases itself is one which requires growth in foreign labour workforce. This however may act as the negative factor which prevents us from “economically restructuring towards innovation”. He argues that this model “is like using a drug ... addicted to cheap labour” and he expresses his concern over the progression of Singapore as a competitive state if the current foreign labour input remains as status quo.

Question 2:

Dr Faizal Yahya firstly voiced out his opinions regarding the People’s Action Party (PAP) and the election cycle. He questioned the voting choices of newly appointed Singapore citizens and wondered if they will continue to vote for the ruling party for the next two General Elections. He then proceeded to express his concerns regarding the current workings of the Singapore economy by drawing comparisons between foreign and local labour forces. He



pointed out that “foreigners tend to form patterns at work ... build social networks”, allowing them to establish a system of information dissemination regarding job and scholarship prospects within their own preferred circles. This, he says, is lacking within the Singaporean community, putting us at a disadvantage. Dr Faizal also questioned the implications on future employment for locals, arising due to certain niches “being attached to certain nationalities that are coming in from a multitude of countries, for example Filipinos are good for the service industry, Indians are good at IT” hence leaving Singaporeans to acquire the remaining low-skilled jobs instead. In order to tackle the issue, Dr Faizal then suggested the possibility of reskilling the local labour force.

Dr Shamsuri Juhari initially interpreted Dr Faizal Yahya’s concern being that the projected 6.9 million population figure is unreasonable, given that resources exist internally within the country. However, Dr Faizal Yahya went on to clarify that what he felt uneasy about was the fact that this sudden jump from 6.5 to 6.9 million came unprecedented and that there was no justification made on how the figure of 6.9 million originated from, given that over the past 2 to 3 years, the population has been stagnating at approximately 5.3 million. He added, “There’s also a report which says that our MRT system can also take up to 4M capacity because of the size, design, carriage and so forth. So your infrastructure is already a very heavier load, let’s say for 6M figure, so why push it to 6.9M?”

Question 3:

Ms Fatimah brought attention to the fact that there are loopholes and missing details in the Population White Paper. She firstly pointed out to the lack of explanation offered by the Paper regarding the implications of having such a huge number of foreigners on Singapore’s economy. She then went on to address the issue of affirmative action-in-reverse, pointing out that the high incidence of “very poorly and under qualified” foreigners in workplaces having to be trained in order for them to better contribute to their organisation. However, Fatimah questioned why there has never been a thought to instead open these positions up to local Singaporeans which are better than the existing foreigners in the workplace. She called for

“affirmative action” to be genuinely taken in such workplaces. Ms Fatimah then went on to raise her third concern which is on the issue fairness in social mobility. She argued that the idea of fairness has been held onto very strongly in our society but this is precisely what is lacking and has hampered our progress and ability to move forward. Lastly, the value system came into question as Ms Fatimah called upon the need to re-identify the core values of Singapore in correlation with the need for competitiveness. “If we lose our quality of being non-corrupt... (but instead) lacking integrity and relying to compete based on numbers, definitely we will not survive,” she said asserting that “preservation of core values is imperative”.

Dr Leong Chan Hoong responded by agreeing that information gaps exist in the Population White Paper, and emphasised that “if data isn’t provided to substantiate figures, it’s very difficult to engage in meaningful conversation”. He illustrated his point with the example, “, if you look at the current figure of non-residents - 1.5M and the projection in 2030, worst- case scenario is 2.5M, that’s an increase of 1M. If you divide 1M with 17 years, you will get 58K people each year. 58K is not a 2% increase in labour. That’s 3-4% increase...So a lot of mathematics and statistics were going into that computation....(perhaps) this is roughly to replace people who retire and so to factor in the (additional) 2% increase in non-resident labour force”. He then

expressed his sentiments that the unhappiness present is the manifestation of how the targets are derived, and is attributed to the lack of contentment arising from this political divide.

Nizam Ismail then proceeded to address Faizal Yahya’s concern regarding the lack of integration of immigrants. He

corroborated his view that this might pose a potential impediment to Singapore’s stability using the case of Germany, which has seen a high increase in immigrant population over the past few years. He then brought up Ms Fatimah’s concern regarding the lack of meritocracy in the aspect of employment in Singapore and agreed that this will result in a trend of declining opportunities for local-bred Singaporeans. This is especially so when superior, high-ranking positions are held



by non-Singaporeans who would, without question, show preferential treatment and hand over employment opportunities to counterparts from their own homelands.

Question 4:

Next, Mr Bukhari shared with the audience a personal experience growing up in Singapore. He lamented that the government is overly confident of its' past success and have grown to be complacent in addressing the needs of its citizens. He commented that there has been a steep increase in the cost of living fuelling negative sentiments towards the governance of the nation. He said that this might result in the rising consensus that an opposition ruling party should govern the nation given the perceived incompetence of the current ruling party. He feels that this is a serious issue eventhough opposition parties, such as the Worker's Party, have released statements commenting that they are unprepared to fully govern Singapore. He then proceeded to suggest that the government should analyse the root causes of the happiness and success of the "old Singapore" as a means to improve on the current situation.

Question 5:

A question from the floor arose regarding the assertion from some quarters that foreigners hailing from the Philippines and Myanmar, who managed to obtain Singapore citizenship, are being categorized as Malays in their NRIC. The participant expressed concern at the lack of transparency offered by the government pertaining to the aforementioned matter of contention as previous attempts at seeking clarification on this matter went unnoticed. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was asked the same question during Convention 2012 and has yet to get back regarding the issue while MP Zainal Sapari's question pertaining to the matter that had been raised in Parliament also went unanswered. He then went on to question if there is a hidden agenda behind the Population White Paper. This was a concern, he pointed out, "because the White Paper was read out in Parliament after the by-election" and just before the announcement regarding Budget 2013 in two weeks' time. He voiced out his belief that the White Paper is being used as a strategy by the

government to manipulate and get citizens to accept its solutions to previously unaddressed issues, citing the widespread debate on foreign workers – especially at the Singapore Conversation – as an example.

Question 6:

Dr Amin Talib commented that there have been several salient concerns raised regarding the impact of the influx of foreigners' on the social demographics of the nation. However, he opines that there is much to be learnt from Singapore's past success in its migration history. Apart from that, he went on to comment that he was appalled at the fact that "PAP members are not allowed to vote according to their conscience in the Parliament" as well as the alternatives to the White Paper. He strongly believes that there should be a re-discussion of the White Paper so that alternate suggestions and strategies can be put forward. He proceeded to elaborate, "We should demand that the White Paper go through a referendum, not the Parliament since free decision in the Parliament is not allowed".

Dr Amin Talib further commented that the cases such as the one regarding the Indonesian student related by Mr Nizam were recurrent and repetitive. Thus, he suggested that a task force to be set up to tackle such issues. This strategy would serve to offer a more multi-pronged approach towards the immigration debate, so as to effectively address the different concerns that might surface from the various communities involved, be it the Malay community or any specific foreign entities entering Singapore. This further ensures that the guidelines and objectives of the White Paper are not compromised.

Prof Daniel Goh then stepped in to address Dr Faizal Yahya's earlier question on voting choices made by new citizens. Despite being a member of the Worker's Party, Prof Goh declines possessing information on new citizens or, in reference to the earlier question on possible hidden agendas, the



existence of a political conspiracy by the government. He argues that how new citizens will vote cannot be predicted. “By right PAP should have won the Punggol East by-election because there are a lot of new citizens over there, but it didn’t happen”, he cited as an example. On the Population White Paper, Prof Goh offered the opinion that it has flaws due to it being a “technocratic planning document, very much mooted in the discourse of modern state”. In this, he explains that population in the modern state is seen as “resources that can be put into a machine, of which outcome will be economic outputs”. It precisely due to this perception that the state has of its people that has caused unrest as Singaporeans would, he argued, “expect something more from this government than just the reduction of Singaporeans or population to economic digit and resources”.

Nizam Ismail agreed with Dr Amin Talib’s take on the issue and thought that it was something that they could look up along with their (Muslim Expatriates) MEX strategy. Regarding the issue on the 6.9 million population figure, he explained that the White Paper explicitly stated that it projects a 6.5 to 6.9 million figure, with 6.9 million being the worst-case scenario. However, there are many other issues that will arise given the 6.9 million figure, such as the supply of houses as well as a looming property bubble and potentially higher cost of living. These issues have to be thoughtfully weighed upon and implications meticulously analysed.

To conclude, Prof Tan Ern Ser echoed the earlier views of Prof Goh with regards to new citizens. He agreed that there is no correlation between being new citizens and voting for the ruling party. Prof Tan suggests that after 10 years or so, these new citizens would have similar attitudes to local Singaporeans “in part because the issues and problems they confront could be somewhat similar”.

The session ended at approximately 9.50 p.m.