

Speech by Minister Grace Fu on population, at the Committee of Supply

“MOVING AHEAD WITH CONFIDENCE FOR A SUSTAINABLE POPULATION”

Madam Chairperson, I would like to thank members for their questions.

OVERVIEW OF CHANGES IN OUR POPULATION

Maintaining a sustainable population

Ms Jessica Tan and Ms Foo Mee Har have asked about our progress towards a sustainable population for Singapore. We saw positive signs in 2014, with more couples marrying and having children. Citizen births have risen to around 33,000 births, up from about 31,000 births in 2013, and the TFR has increased to 1.25¹ from 1.19 the year before. There were about 24,000 marriages involving at least one citizen in 2014, the highest since 1997. We are heartened by these encouraging developments.

We have maintained our calibrated approach for immigration. Last year, 20,348 Singaporean Citizenships (SCs) and 29,854 new Permanent Residencies (PRs) were granted. The size of our Permanent Resident population has stabilised, and in fact fallen slightly in the last 2 years. Overall, our immigrants help to prevent our citizen population from shrinking.

We remain on track for slower and more sustainable population growth. Our total population grew last year, but the overall growth rate of 1.3% was the slowest in the last decade, in line with what was proposed in the Population White Paper. This is due to concrete measures taken to moderate foreign workforce growth. As we restructure our economy, we expect the tight labour market to continue. We recognise that this is a challenging period, and have, as announced at Budget, increased the support for businesses by expanding the Special Employment Credit, deferring some of the levy increases for S Pass and Work Permits planned for this year, and supporting innovation and internationalisation.

Within our citizen population, the median age increased to 40.4 years and the proportion of those aged 65 and above rose to 12.4%.² More of our older Singaporeans are remaining active and meaningfully engaged. And many of the measures in the Budget, including CPF adjustments and the Silver Support Scheme, are intended to put our older Singaporeans in a position to be better prepared for the future and to ensure a high quality of life even as more Singaporeans age.

In all, we remain committed to our goal of a sustainable population, to ensure that Singapore remains a good home for Singaporeans of all ages to live, work and play.

RENEWED EMPHASIS ON THE SINGAPOREAN CORE IN THE WORKFORCE

Helping all Singaporeans maximise their potential

We will continue to grow and strengthen the Singaporean core in the workforce. We strive to provide the right programmes and resources, so that all Singaporeans have access to fulfilling career opportunities.

More Singaporeans, especially older workers and mothers, are re-joining and remaining in the workforce. The labour force participation rates for those aged 55 to 64, and for women, have risen steadily over the past decade.³ Singaporeans and their employers can tap on schemes such as

WorkPro to support back-to-work Singaporeans. In addition, child care subsidies and leave schemes have helped working mothers to better achieve their family and career aspirations. Through SkillsFuture, we are enabling Singaporeans to develop to their full potential through lifelong learning and mastery of skills.

Facilitating Overseas Singaporeans' return

Overseas Singaporeans, too, are part of this vision for the Singaporean core. And I thank Mrs Lina Chiam, Ms Jessica Tan and Ms Foo Mee Har for speaking so passionately about engaging Overseas Singaporeans.

Indeed, Singaporeans go abroad for various reasons, such as work and study. Through outreach efforts of the Overseas Singaporean Unit (OSU), we keep in touch with them, so that they maintain ties back home, and remain committed to Singapore's shared future.

We coordinate efforts across Government agencies to facilitate those who wish to return. Contact Singapore facilitates career opportunities, while MOE helps with school admission and placement for children. The OSU runs programmes such as Camp@Home for students who are back in Singapore for holidays, to familiarise them with life in Singapore, for a smoother re-integration when they return.

Employers are hiring returning Singaporeans because of their skillsets and global outlook. One example is Ms Rena Sim, an occupational therapy specialist who completed her degree in Australia last year. Despite having opportunities in Australia, Rena chose to return. She says – "My main takeaway from having lived abroad is to be appreciative of what Singapore has done for me, and not forget my family who has been so supportive". Rena got in touch with Contact Singapore through career fairs, and secured her current position as an Occupational Therapist with Thye Hua Kwan Therapy Services. Occupational therapy is growing in demand in Singapore, and Rena looks forward to applying her expertise gained from her time in Australia to help fellow Singaporeans.

As for the individuals whom Mrs Lina Chiam referred to, these people have chosen to remain in self-imposed exile. Some of them are liable for outstanding offences which they are required to resolve with the authorities. They cannot be expected to be placed above the law. Others have outstanding security cases and would need to resolve their cases with our security agencies. For example, those who were involved or associated with the violent Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) would have to sever ties with the CPM, renounce violence and be interviewed by the security agencies. These conditions are not new or unreasonably onerous. Many of their former CPM compatriots had accepted them and gone on to resettle in Singapore with their families.

Even as we build up the Singaporean core in our workforce, it is important that Singapore remains open to foreigners. Foreigners help to plug gaps that cannot be filled by Singaporeans, provide expertise and ideas to kickstart new sectors, and transfer skills that enrich our local workforce and businesses. For example, research and development in Singapore has benefited from the experience and expertise from around the world, and has resulted in several breakthroughs such as more effective treatment of tuberculosis⁴ and underwater robotics⁵. The result is a more flexible and competitive workforce which is responsive to the shifting global business environment.

SUPPORTING AND CELEBRATING MARRIAGE AND PARENTHOOD

On the marriage and parenthood front, we hope that the increases in both marriages and births in 2014 will mark the start of a positive trend, with even more marriages and births in Singapore's 50th year of independence.

Singaporeans have given us positive and enthusiastic feedback on the SG50 Baby Jubilee Gift initiative, and we hope this warm reception will mean that we will give out many more Jubilee Gifts this year. On this note, we would like to remind everyone that there is still some time left, although not very much, and it is not too late to have a SG50 Baby!

Integrated pro-family support

Supporting Singaporeans in their marriage and parenthood aspirations remains a key priority in our population policies. Over the past few years, we have enhanced our Marriage and Parenthood Package, and invested significantly in support measures like enhanced housing options, and more affordable and quality child care.

Ms Lee Li Lian and Ms Kuik Shiao-Yin have suggested improving the support given to parents. There are several initiatives in this Budget to support families and children through their developmental years, amounting to an estimated \$470 million in 2015. For instance, there are measures targeted at lowering education costs, including enhanced financial assistance schemes for students, waiver of exam fees, and top-ups for the Child Development, Edusave and Post-Secondary Education Accounts. The Foreign Domestic Worker concessionary levy has also been halved.

Ms Kuik suggested improvements to the child care sector to provide equal opportunities for all children. To help give every child a good start, the Early Childhood Development Agency or ECDA is increasing pre-school places, enhancing subsidies, and strengthening the pipeline of quality manpower. ECDA will be introducing the Partner Operator Scheme, or POP, to complement the Anchor Operator Scheme, AOP. Child care operators on the scheme will have to commit to keeping fees affordable, developing their teachers, and enhancing the quality of their centres. The Minister for Social and Family Development will provide more details in his speech.

Ms Kuik also suggested enhancing leave for fathers to encourage shared parental responsibility. We agree that fathers and mothers should play a more equal role in raising their children, and have been strengthening support for fathers over the years, through measures such as paternity leave and shared parental leave, which we introduced in 2013. We will monitor if this should be enhanced, and will continue to study ways to encourage fathers to play a more active role in child-raising and to strengthen work-life support for working parents, in partnership with employers. We are glad to see that more companies are putting in place flexible work arrangements. Progressive employers assess and value their employees based on the quality of their work, rather than “face-time”. This benefits the employees, and also gives companies a competitive advantage in talent retention and recruitment.

Singapore company Home-Fix is a good example.⁶ Home-Fix educates its middle management on making work-life initiatives more accessible to its employees. The company is reaping dividends, as employees who feel engaged and satisfied go the extra mile to provide excellent customer service. The company can also better retain and groom talent from within. Many companies in the retail sector expect their frontline staff to work six days a week, and to avoid taking off during peak business days, typically on the weekends. Mr Alvin Tay, Branch-in-Charge at Home-Fix Marina Square, appreciates that his company has made the bold move to buck the industry norm. He has the option of a five-day work week, and two days off on weekends per month, which gives him more quality time with his wife and two year-old son. Alvin has been with Home-Fix for ten years. Other commendable examples include Citibank Singapore⁷, IT and business technology firm Avanade Asia⁸, and translation and copywriting firm Elite Translations Asia⁹. These companies are from very different industries, and vary in size. Yet, all of them exercise the same foresight in investing in programmes that take employees’ work-life needs into account, to the mutual benefit

of the employees and the business.

We will continue to look at providing integrated support along the marriage and parenthood journey, and encourage greater shared parental responsibility for both fathers and mothers to care for and bond with their children. These are key factors that have contributed to the higher TFR in the Nordic countries.

Ms Kuik suggested treating children equally, regardless of whether they are born to a single parent or a married couple. We understand that parenthood is a challenging journey and have along the way buttressed the support for families. We value every Singaporean child, and are committed to giving all Singaporean children a good start in life. Our M&P Package and the related initiatives announced in the Budget, support different objectives and different phases of a couple's life – from marriage, getting a first flat, conceiving and delivering a child, and raising a child – whether it is cost involved in education or healthcare, to supporting women to continue working. So it is a whole package with a slew of announcements, but each meeting a different social objective; rather than a single initiative that meets all objectives. So by having a slew of initiatives, we hope that we are able to fulfil different needs from different perspectives. Single parents who are widowed or divorced would have received the same benefits as married parents. For those single parents who have not ever been married, while incentives to encourage marriage would not be available to them, they are able to tap on benefits such as the Medisave grant and MediShield coverage for newborns, child care and infant care subsidies, and child care leave for parents. The Government has over time enhanced the benefits that these single parents can tap on for their child.

Stay-at-home mothers can enjoy most of the measures under the Marriage and Parenthood Package. All parents, regardless of work status, are supported with some child and infant care subsidies. Working mothers receive more subsidies as they may need to send their children to full-day child care programmes, whereas non-working mothers have the option of sending their children for half day child care or kindergartens, both of which would have cost less. And for stay-at-home mothers, the SkillsFuture will benefit them directly, having not been able to benefit from employersponsored training.

I am glad to hear that Ms Lee Li Lian supports the CDA scheme being a co-savings scheme with the Government supporting parents who wish to save for their children. Ms Lee suggested further support for lower income families. There is currently support for lower-income families through several Government schemes, such as Comcare assistance schemes, additional infant care and child care subsidies, and subsidies under the Kindergarten Fee Assistance Scheme. So also in response to Ms Kuik's suggestion earlier on, we try as much as possible, with schemes such as child care subsidies or infant care subsidies, to address the needs of those who have lower income and are therefore in need of greater financial support. Low-income families, for example, pay as little as \$3 per month for child care, and \$1 per month for kindergarten. So in terms of equalising support for the child, I think some of these schemes do go a long way to try as much as possible to make up for a different starting point. I just take for example the basic universal care subsidy which is \$300 for all mums, but if you are a low-income family, you will get up to probably \$400, \$450 more a month. And if you analyse let's say for five years of the child's pre-school education, that would more than make up for any difference in the Child Development Account or Baby Bonus. And eligible first-timer lower-income couples who purchase BTO flats, for example, are subsidised heavily for housing. They may receive housing grants of up to \$60,000. And those who purchase resale flats can receive housing grants of up to \$80,000, comprising the CPF Housing Grant of up to \$40,000 which is available to all first-timer applicants of resale flats, and the Additional CPF Housing Grant of up to \$40,000 given to lower and middle-income first-timers. So there are schemes to address the financial needs of low-income couples. The Baby Bonus Scheme is part of the overall Marriage & Parenthood Package to provide parents with broad-based support in their parenthood aspirations. It is designed to be in line with the principle that

parents bear the primary responsibility for the care and development of their children, with support from the Government. So we are in agreement with Ms Lee. And with regard to Ms Lee's specific proposal about changing the ratio of support, this a suggestion that we welcome and we will look carefully into the effectiveness of the scheme.

On foreign spouses, there are immigration facilities available, to support the family and the foreign spouses to settle in and integrate. These include the Long-Term Visit Pass (LTVP) and Long-Term Visit Pass-Plus (LTVP+), which enable the spouses to be employed and have access to some medical benefits, and over time, progress towards naturalisation as PRs and citizens. As at end-December 2003, we had around 39,200 foreign spouses who had taken up PR and then citizenship under the Family Ties Scheme. This cumulative figure has since grown to about 78,900 by end-December 2014.

The Government recently introduced a series of measures to help Singaporeanforeigner couples better plan for their future and to support such cross-cultural marriages. The Pre-Marriage LTVP Assessment (PMLA) introduced in January this year provides couples with greater clarity on their eligibility for LTVP before marriage.

It is also now easier for foreign spouses who hold an LTVP or LTVP+ to seek employment. Prospective employers of foreign spouses with LTVPs or LTVP+ only have to apply for a Letter of Consent (LOC). These foreign spouses will not be subjected to Work Permit restrictions and their employers are not required to pay the foreign workers' levy for them.

The Government also launched new marriage programmes to help Singaporeanforeigner couples better manage cross-cultural differences, equip the foreign spouse with basic conversational English, and introduce the couples to useful community resources.

Since the measures were introduced in January 2015, ICA has received 726 applications for PMLA in the first month, and 93 couples have attended MSF's Marriage Preparation Programme or Marriage Support Programme. As the measures were only introduced very recently, we will continue to monitor the effect closely.

OUR STRENGTHS AS A MULTICULTURAL AND OPEN SOCIETY

Concerted efforts for integration

Mr Yeo Guat Kwang, Ms Jessica Tan and Ms Ellen Lee have asked about maintaining our strong and cohesive society. As Singaporeans, we are proud of our multicultural heritage. We worked hard over the years to strengthen the cohesion of our multicultural society. And we will need to apply constant effort to maintain this, as our population becomes more diverse.

Immigrants are attracted to Singapore for the opportunities and the way of life here. To address Mr Muhamad Faisal Manap's question Malay migrants have similar considerations in deciding whether to come to Singapore. We will continue to welcome new immigrants of all ethnicities, including Malays, who are willing and able to integrate well, share our values, and contribute to our society. And I am glad to note that Mr Faisal Manap is supportive of immigration and is making a suggestion for a plan to attract Malay migrants.

New immigrants help to enrich our multicultural society, and bring new perspectives, ideas and solutions.

However, as newcomers take time to adapt, frictions may arise. It is understandable that Singaporeans are concerned with the impact of these changes to our identity as a people. It is

important that newcomers adapt to and respect our way of life. Those who choose to settle down here for the long term must share our values and be committed to our common future. At the same time, let us remain confident of our ability to strengthen and enrich our Singaporean identity, as we reach out to friends, neighbours, co-workers, and even family members who have come from beyond our shores.

There are signs that we are making progress. I am heartened to observe many instances where people, Singaporeans and newcomers alike, treat one another with respect and consideration. There are many stories of friendships between Singaporeans and newcomers. We are also seeing more balanced responses to reports of undesirable behaviours by individuals, which tend to gain traction quickly on social media. As and when tensions arise, everyone must make the effort to keep a cool head and work together to resolve them.

Strengthening integration efforts

We will continue to strengthen integration efforts by leveraging natural touch points such as in schools and workplaces, and through ground up and community-based efforts. Mr Yeo Guat Kwang has suggested grassroots organisations, NGOs and so on. We welcome participation of all such groups.

We share Ms Kuik's passion about the use of Literature and the teaching of Literature and Social Studies are important in cultivating values, such as resilience and a commitment to social cohesion, as well as skills in understanding and evaluating different perspectives. We agree with Ms Kuik's observation. Besides these subjects, there is also the Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) curriculum where, through Learning Journeys and Co-Curricular Activities, all students are taught to put the values into practice. We have encouraged our students to pursue learning in their interest areas. Minister Heng (for Education) has emphasised in this House that learning should go beyond grades, to learning for mastery of skills as well as internalising important values. Our education system will continue to provide multiple pathways for students to pursue their interests and be all-rounded learners.

In wider society, there is growing awareness of the importance of integration. We are encouraged by the enthusiasm of individuals, communities, and organisations that want to play their part. We provide resources to support and synergise these efforts, including co-funding ground-up integration projects through the Community Integration Fund. We look beyond one-off events. That is why in our selection of projects to cofund, we pay more attention to those which encourage meaningful interactions, and promote positive mindsets between Singaporeans and newcomers.

One example is the "Breaking Boundaries @ SIM" programme, in which Singaporean students lead newcomers on an experiential tour around Singapore. Along the way, they share about Singapore's social norms and local culture. Friendships begun this way are strengthened as the participants later go on to work together on other projects. Programmes such as this help participants to deepen and sustain their relationships with one another.

We are also always on the lookout for new and innovative approaches. Last year, we co-funded "Encounters 2014", a series of playback theatre performances, involving Singaporeans, new immigrants and migrant workers. Audience members were invited to share their personal encounters, which the performers then enacted through improvisation. "Playing back" these stories helped audiences reflect on their experiences and consider their own assumptions about people from different backgrounds. We are happy to work with the community to explore other fresh ideas that can bring more groups together.

VISION FOR SINGAPORE

The goal of our population policies is to build a better Singapore, for our people. Singapore will be a good place to raise children, where we can enjoy quality family time and build strong families. Our society and economy will remain open, to provide ample opportunities for Singaporeans to fulfil their aspirations. In our cosmopolitan society, there will be harmonious relations between people of different backgrounds, and we will build a cohesive nation united by shared values and goals.

I read with interest the recent articles by Mr Sourav Roy in the Straits Times where on behalf of foreigners living here, he expressed deep gratitude for Singapore, and said – “We want to be a part of you, not for what we can take from you but for what we can share with you”. First and foremost, he wanted to share his love and respect for our “wonderful country”, and its “beautiful people”. What was encouraging was that a foreigner had put into words all the good he sees in Singapore and Singaporeans, and expressed his desire to start his family here and contribute to this place. It takes someone, sometimes, with a different perspective to help us see who we are. What was even more heartening was the response from Singaporeans, who welcomed him and invited him into their lives. This, to me, is quintessentially Singaporean – to be generous of heart and to be able to see the person behind the differences.

Even simple gestures – taking the time to say “hello” or sharing a meal together – can open the door to deeper interactions and understanding. Let us make it a point this year to greet, meet and eat together, and be involved.

Singapore has achieved much. Through our collective efforts, we are confident that we will remain a cohesive society, and we can realise Singapore’s promise as a vibrant global city and an endearing home for all of us.

Thank you.

¹ Preliminary figure.

² As of June 2013, the median age of the citizen population was 40.0 years, and the proportion of citizens aged 65 and above was 11.7%.

³ Labour force participation rate (LFPR) for residents aged 55 – 64 increased from 49.5% in 2004 to 68.4% in 2014. LFPR for females rose from 51.3% in 2004 to 58.6% in 2014.

⁴ A team of international scientists led by the Singapore Immunology Network (SIgN), a research institute under A*STAR discovered that existing diabetes drug Metformin can also be used together with existing tuberculosis (TB) medication to enhance the effectiveness of existing TB treatments. 17 Dec 2014

⁵ A team of local and foreign researchers at NUS’ Electrical and Computer Engineering Department developed a turtle robot with enhanced manoeuvrability, by modelling its movements after a real turtle. It is capable of performing complicated underwater tasks and could be deployed for hazardous situations, e.g. detecting nuclear wastes underwater. 23 Dec 2014

⁶ Work-Life Achiever Award 2014 Recipient, (180 employees).

⁷ Work-Life Achiever Award 2014 Recipient, (over 10,000 employees). Citi Singapore’s Citi Work Strategies Programme provides two broad segments of flexibility options which employees can mix and match across the segments to find the best-fit solution for their work-life needs – “work styles” (remote work options), and “flex-styles” (working hours options).

⁸ Work-Life Excellence Award 2014 Recipient, (130 employees). Avanade Asia’s Orange Life Programme was created to provide a structured framework of work-life policies and flexible leave and working arrangement programmes for sustainable work-life harmony.

⁹ Work-Life Achiever Award 2014 Recipient, (25 employees). Elite Translations gives its employees flexibility in the way they work, and has sought the help of external consultants to identify and eliminate factors that could be detrimental to work-life harmony.