

**SPEECH BY MR GOH CHOK TONG, SENIOR MINISTER, AT DEEPA THIRUNAL 2009, 07 NOVEMBER 2009, 8:00 PM AT THE BRADDELL HEIGHTS COMMUNITY CLUB**

Happy Deepavali to our Hindu friends.

1. Two recent events caused me to reflect more deeply on Singaporeans' concern on the subject of immigration: an RC Deepavali function in Marine Parade and my visit to Fujian.

2. At the Deepavali function, several young Indian children put up some dance items. They were children of PRs from India. Their fathers came from Mumbai, New Delhi and Chennai, amongst other places. They work in accounting and IT firms, like Microsoft and IBM. These children could easily pass off as Singaporeans. Their parents encourage them to mix with Singaporeans and they will grow up with Singaporean values and Singaporean friends.

3. When I was in Fujian, I visited my ancestral village, Wuling. I was able to trace my ancestry to as far back as 1403, 17 generations ago, to a remote village in mountainous Yongchun county. My father was born in China. I was born in Singapore. Though my forefathers were Chinese, all 16 generations of them, there is no doubt that I am Singaporean in my thinking and upbringing, and perceived as a Singaporean. I was warmly welcomed in my ancestral village not as a returning Chinese national but as a visiting Singaporean leader.

4. These two experiences tell me that the new immigrants to Singapore can become Singaporean in outlook and loyalty within a generation, if we make the effort to integrate them. New immigrants are PRs or new Singapore citizens. The rest of the foreigners in Singapore are mainly migrant workers.

5. In recent months, Singaporeans have expressed concern over the adverse impact of the large number of PRs and migrant workers on our way of life. This is understandable. Singapore is densely populated, so any slight difference in living habits is magnified. Singaporeans have also worked hard to achieve a high standard of living. Naturally, they fear being crowded out by the influx of foreigners – crowded out of HDB flats, choice schools and jobs. Some foreigners are also perceived to be taking advantage of the better opportunities and services in Singapore but without the obligations of giving back to the community or doing their share of National Service.

6. PAP MPs have raised these concerns in Parliament over the years. Ministers have explained why we need to top up our population with foreigners, and how Singaporeans will always have better benefits than PRs and foreigners. But despite this, many Singaporeans still feel uneasy that the government is

continuing to take in more PRs and migrant workers. It has become an emotive issue.

7. To me, whether we should have more immigrants and migrant workers or not boils down to whether they help us to **sustain and enrich the quality of life of Singaporeans**.

8. Ideally, we want Singaporeans to have as many children as they can afford to have so that we do not depend too much on foreigners. But we have tried with baby bonus, maternity benefits, tax incentives, and child care support. They have not worked. We even tried state-sponsored matchmaking! For all our effort in encouraging marriage and procreation, our total fertility rate climbed only marginally from 1.26 in 2004 to 1.28 last year. This is still far short of the 2.1 needed to replace father and mother. In absolute terms, we need about 60,000 babies per year. Last year, we had only 32,400 citizen babies! How do we make up for the shortfall?

9. Without PRs and new citizens, Singapore will go the way of the dinosaurs. If we do not take in any more new immigrants, our population will begin to shrink in 2020. That is only 11 years away! Let me give you another statistic. In the last 10 years, the number of people aged 65 and above has grown by about 100,000 while the number of children aged below 15 had shrunk by about 50,000. This is an unsustainable demographic structure.

10. To **sustain our present standard of living**, we need to top up our population with immigrants, particularly those with skills, entrepreneurial drive and talent. Without them, my guess is that our growth rate would be easily 1 to 2 percentage points lower. Well, you may say, let us do without this extra boost of 1 to 2 percentage points from foreigners in future and be satisfied with our present quality of life. But it is not that simple. Without the foreign workforce, our flats and MRT will not be built, our buses will come to a standstill, our healthcare services will degrade, and many investors, including Singaporean ones, will uproot and go where talent is abundant. Instead of sacrificing just 1-2 percentage points of growth, our economy will shrink, and our quality of life decline.

11. But beyond just sustaining our quality of life, **immigrants enrich our society**. Immigrants inject a certain vitality and diversity to our society, adding vibrancy to our economy, and broadening our horizons in other fields like the arts, music, sports, and philanthropy. A commentary in Lianhe Zaobao last weekend observed that the influx of immigrants has already increased the vibrancy of the local arts and cultural scene and also introduced a wider range of cuisines to Singapore.

12. Opening our doors to immigrants and migrant workers is an emotive subject. It goes to the heart of what it means to be Singaporean. The government must take all views into account, and then persuade and win over

Singaporeans. We will have to explain clearly and convincingly why Singapore is better off with immigrants. How do we remind Singaporeans that no more than a few generations ago, we were all immigrants? At the same time, how do we put Singaporeans first, and protect our cherished way of life? Are we bringing in too many, too quickly? As Singapore is the top choice for migrants, according to a recent Gallup Poll, can we be more selective? Is it possible to distinguish between those who are committed to Singapore and those who use Singapore as a stepping stone to other places?

13. We should also address what new immigrants can do to become more Singaporean. Conversely, what can each of us do to help the new immigrants integrate and be Singaporeans? How do we encourage the more successful immigrants to give back to Singapore society, in community service and/or donations to charity for example?

14. We will have to face up to the problems encountered by Singaporeans on the ground. Explaining in macro terms using overall statistics is not good enough. We have to deal with real situations faced by Singaporeans.

15. This immigration issue is a critical one, and we must bring Singaporeans on board to understand and support what we are doing. They must feel that they have a stake in the intake of immigrants and migrant workers, and see that these people, by bolstering our economy and demographic structure, make their lives better and not worse. Singapore is at a threshold. If we turn away immigrants, it will have dire long-term consequences for Singapore. If we have them in the right numbers and quality, it will boost our economic vitality.

16. It is not my intention tonight to open up another round of debate on this subject of immigration. Our more immediate priority is to ensure that our economy is set on the road to recovery, which is what the Economic Strategies Committee is actively deliberating. My intention is for us to quietly reflect on the critical importance of immigration to our long term future. It is a difficult issue confronting many societies. If Singapore can handle it better than others, we will have a considerable edge over the rest.

17. Finally, let me say that tonight's gathering is an example of a truly Singaporean event. It is Deepavali but we are celebrating it in a multi-racial way, with Indian, Malay and Chinese performances.

18. Have an enjoyable evening!