

HOPE HEART HOME



Couples make their decisions to have kids in a complex and holistic fashion... It is never a simple cost-benefit analysis.

— Sociologist Daniel Goh at the National University of Singapore, who thinks it may take more than housing and pro-creation measures to get more couples to have babies



'BEST HOME'

Housing priority for parents?

Govt mulling if such a move and paternity leave could boost birth rate

By ANDREA ONG

IN A move that is bound to stir controversy, the Government is thinking of giving couples with young children priority when they book HDB flats.

A less controversial measure to boost Singapore's declining birth rate: allowing paternity leave, or some form of it.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong made these announcements last night when he turned to a perennial rally topic: How to arrest Singapore's total fertility rate, which was a dismal 1.2 last year.

The Government is looking at a range of measures, which take in views from a public consultation exercise ahead of the release of the White Paper on population next January.

Mr Lee noted that housing issues are now "off the boil" with more flats having been built and many more in the pipeline.

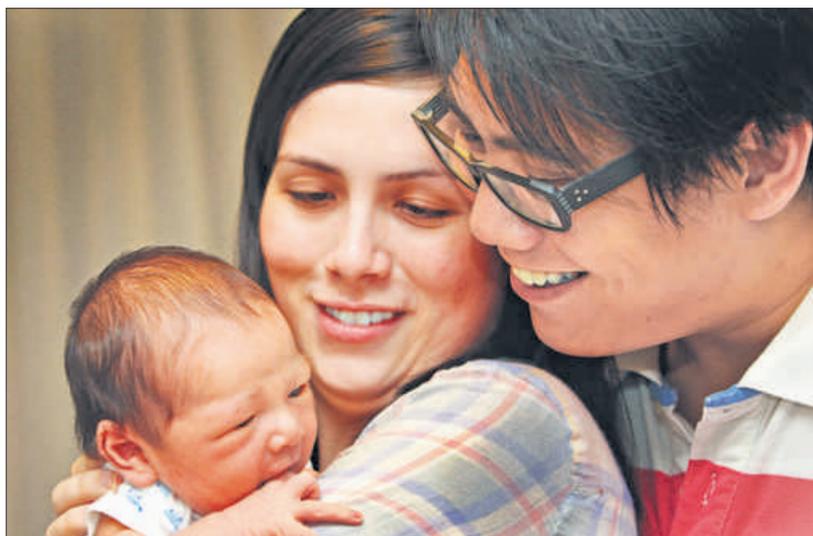
"I think that we should give some consideration to giving couples with young kids priority when they book HDB flats," he said. "Firstly it will solve their problem faster. Secondly, it may encourage them to have a kid so that the flat will come faster."

He noted how in other countries, people get married, have children, then eventually save up and buy a house. "In Singapore, it's the other way round. House first. Then you think about marriage. Then you think about kids."

As to how parents care for the baby once it arrives, he said that keeping maternity leave to 16 weeks "was about all right". The National Trades Union Congress recently proposed extending it to six months.

"You can make it longer but employees have serious worries and we should take them seriously. And I think employees have worries too," he said.

Then, with a smile, he



Mrs Elizabeth Yang with her week-old son Elliot and husband Neil. She said that if she and her husband had not already secured their own home in Clementi, they would have delayed parenthood. ST PHOTO: TED CHEN

announced: "But this idea of paternal leave in some form – either you give some to the husband or you make some of the maternity leave convertible, we have said 'no' for a very long time, but I think it's time we change."

This is "to signal the importance of the father's role and your shared responsibility for raising the children. So please use the paternity leave for the purpose it is given".

The audience applauded.

Another measure he raised was to give each newborn baby a Medisave account, which will come with a "small hongbao" to lessen the load of childhood medical ex-

penses. More will also be done to promote work-life balance, such as encouraging flexible work arrangements and improving work culture and employers' attitudes.

Mr Lee added: "Maybe you should take seriously the idea of having one day a week when you close shop at 6 o'clock and if you are seen in the office after that, that's a minus for promotion purposes!"

More help should also be given to low- and middle-income families for childcare and infant care.

While Singapore's total fertility rate is on the downward trend, the Government "cannot give up" in its quest to encourage Singapo-

reans to settle down and start families, said Mr Lee.

However, not everything can be solved by the Government, he noted. It can do only so much to change workplace culture, while money alone will not encourage people to have children.

Observers and family groups hailed the move to legislate paternity leave but had reservations about giving couples with children priority for housing.

But banker Neil Yang, 29, and his teacher wife Elizabeth, 25, said the move might help young couples like themselves start families earlier.

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Touching hearts, inspiring hope

By PHUA MEI PIN, TOH YONG CHUAN and MATTHIAS CHEW

THIS year's theme of a home with hope and heart resonated with many who listened to the Prime Minister speak last night.

They saw it as a departure from past rallies that focused more on hard policy matters.

Manager Jared Chee, 42, was so taken with the three H's that he came up with three of his own: Hard, Help and High.

"We should not be too hard on ourselves, as we can be proud of what we've done. We need to help others who are not as well-off. And we need to have high aspirations to build a home for our next generation. These are the messages I took away," he said.

Others interviewed noted a particularly positive and personal quality to this year's speech, in which Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong reminded parents to let their children enjoy their childhood, and made a soft promise of paternity leave.

Former Nominated MP Zulkifli Baharudin noted that the speech did not delve into technical policy details. Instead, Mr Lee focused on the future and connected emotionally with Singaporeans.

"You can see from his emotion that PM Lee felt these are important matters. If we cannot agree on our future destiny together, the other matters are irrelevant," Mr Zulkifli said.

Cultural studies academic Liew Kai Khiun, 39, was glad the Prime Minister did not use the occasion to hand out goodies in the form of subsidies or benefits.

He liked the vision of a home with heart and hope: "That pulls people towards more positive sentiments, and allows them to understand the broader strokes."

Dr Liew also welcomed a review of things once considered non-negotiable, such as letting singles buy new HDB flats, and paternity leave.

Banking executive Ann Chiu, 32, who is single, was happy with the news that National Development Minister Khaw Boon Wan is actively looking at housing for singles, and the push towards a better work-life balance.

"A lot of what he said was a step in the right direction. It's what a lot of people want to hear. But... it will take two hands to clap. Employers and employees will have to play their part," she said.

But some were less impressed, including Singapore Management University political scientist Bridget Welsh.

She acknowledged that the speech made a start at recognising issues that worry Singaporeans, but she said she would have liked to hear more creative solutions for addressing the declining birth rate and tensions between Singaporeans and foreigners.

For sociologist Paulin Tay Straughan, the forward-looking aspect of the speech made for an *akan datang* (Malay for "coming soon") message.

"There are a lot of things to look forward to.... It's very clear that he's not able to give us the Government's solution, or promises of what he's going to be able to do next year. But there seems to be a serious effort at rethinking what is needed," she said.

History buff Jerome Lim, 47, appreciated the trip down memory lane when PM Lee shared pictures and memories from his childhood.

But what he found wanting were concrete steps to help Singaporeans continue to connect with significant spaces even as change continues.

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Home means other things as well – memories of places, places you've known over the years for many years which have changed and when you see it, it's like playing a video replay: You scroll back in your mind's eye and you imagine it as it used to be.

— PM Lee, on how memories make a home



ORCHARD ROAD THEN AND NOW: A photo of Orchard Road in its earlier days (above left). The area is now a bustling belt of shopping centres (above) and a major tourist attraction. PHOTOS: SINGAPORE PRESS HOLDINGS, MINISTRY OF INFORMATION, COMMUNICATIONS AND THE ARTS

Memories are the 'soul of the nation'

AS A child, the young Hsien Loong spent much of his time at his home in Oxley Road and in his school, Nanyang Primary. At food stalls at an Orchard Road carpark, he ate *ou luak* (oyster omelette) that "has never been better".

Those places have either changed or are no longer around, but the Prime Minister's memories of them remain, along with fond remembrances of the National Day Parades he had attended over the years.

Last night, PM Lee brought up these anecdotes from his personal life to demonstrate the importance of memories in making Singapore the best home for Singaporeans.

"Memories – memories of places, of old friends, of events we've lived through – are also essential to keeping Singapore our best home. It's often in the simple things in life which remind us

most of home," he said.

Accumulating and collecting these stories both individually and collectively, he said, will contribute to the telling of the Singapore Story and strengthen people's emotional ties to the nation.

"These memories come together to define the Singapore Story for all of us," he said.

"Individually, these are our life's experiences. Collectively, these bind together to become the soul of the nation. We must cherish them, and build upon them."

One project that is currently doing this is the Singapore Memory Project, a government initiative that aims to amass five million submissions of Singaporeans' memories by 2015.

Spearheaded by the National Library Board, with the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, it continues to seek submissions through various web-



A young Mr Lee Hsien Loong (standing) with (from left) mum Kwa Geok Choo, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, brother Hsien Yang and sister Wei Ling with the family's black Labrador Nikki on the verandah of their home in Oxley Road in 1965. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE LEE FAMILY

sites, social media sites and roadshows. Started last year, it has collected 300,000 memories so far.

Project director Gene Tan said recently that he was confident of reaching the ambitious goal.

"The culture of memory is an investment in our future," he said.

It was something Mr Lee too had in mind, as he spoke about

how shared memories with some old and new friends had helped him to bond with them as fellow Singaporeans.

Recently, he met Mr Omar Haron, 68, a former soldier who served with him in the Singapore Armed Forces, and they were so happy that Mr Lee quickly snapped a picture of them – both grinning – on his mobile phone.

On a private holiday in Vietnam last year, the PM also bumped into several Singaporeans who lived or worked in Ang Mo Kio and Teck Ghee – where Mr Lee is an MP.

They came up to greet him and took pictures with him. "They are proud to be Singaporean, and they make me feel proud to be Singaporean," he said.