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# Singapore: The Missing Babies Problem

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## Singapore: The Missing Babies Problem

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In his third National Day Rally, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong discussed the critical issues facing Singapore in the long term including the challenges and opportunities in Asia, the necessity of maximising the gains while minimising the risks from the digital age, and the need for emotional 'heart ware' in nation-building.

The Prime Minister began his speech focussing on the economy - regarded as the 'precondition for everything'. The economic fundamentals have not changed. For instance, research and development is relied upon to grow new capabilities in three areas, viz. biomedical science, environmental and water technologies, and interactive and digital media. The mantra of re-training and upgrading of workers was also emphasised. Population issues occupied a significant part of his speech. This is not surprising as, prior to his speech, other ministers had spoken on the topic of Singaporeans not having enough babies as not just a personal or family problem, but a national one.

Despite a slew of incentives and policies to encourage Singaporeans to have more babies, Singapore continues to suffer from very low birth rates. Singapore's total fertility rate (TFR) in 2004 was a historic low of 1.24, among the lowest in the world. In recent years, Singapore has had an average shortfall of 14,000 babies annually. This is not a recent phenomenon as Singapore's TFR has been below the replacement level of 2.1 since 1976. The statistics for the Chinese Singaporean population, who form 76 per cent of the population, are even more worrying to the government. In 1957, there were 6.48 babies per Chinese female. In 2005, this was significantly reduced to 1.08 babies per Chinese female. Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong put the missing babies problem in the following stark terms: 'If the total fertility rate falls further, we will not be replacing even the mother! Will Singapore last 100 years if local-born Singaporeans are becoming an endangered species?'

Prime Minister Lee proposed a three-pronged strategy to manage the problem. First, the government has begun to take an even keener interest in engaging Singaporeans living overseas. An estimated 100,000 to 200,000 Singaporeans (or 2 to 5 per cent of the population) are living overseas. In order not to lose this group of talented and skilled Singaporeans, the government established the Overseas Singaporean Unit earlier this year as part of the larger effort of maintaining strong links with the 'Singapore diaspora' through updating them on developments in Singapore, promoting Singapore events overseas, and assisting them with job opportunities and school placements for their children when they return to Singapore.

The second prong is to ensure that there are sufficient babies. Increasingly, Singaporeans are marrying later or not getting married at all. For those who are married, many have one or two children, or none at all. The main programme is the 'Baby Bonus' scheme - first introduced in 2001 and enhanced in 2004. The scheme has had very modest success. However, it is unlikely that it will be enhanced financially in any substantive manner. Instead, the focus is likely to be on non-financial considerations such as making Singapore more baby (and family)-friendly as well as focusing on engendering attitudinal changes towards marriage and child-bearing.

The third and most significant prong is the expected ramping up of the programme to encourage talented people to migrate to Singapore. More popularly known as the 'foreign talent' programme, the Prime Minister signalled that 'talent' will now not only be confined to graduates, professionals and investors, but will extend to a wider range of people who can contribute to Singapore, add to its diversity and make it more cosmopolitan. To this end, the government will establish a Citizenship and Population Unit to spearhead Singapore's strategy in an increasingly competitive global immigration regime.

The Prime Minister also urged Singaporeans to adopt a 'big-hearted approach' in welcoming the new Singaporeans, who can help Singapore grow and flourish. He was sensitive to the need for the foreign talent programme to gain wider acceptance by Singaporeans who are concerned with the competition posed by the newcomers. By the same token, the Prime Minister urged the new Singaporeans to fit in and share the values and aspirations of Singaporeans.

**WATCHPOINT:** The government will bank on an enhanced immigration policy not only to boost the population figures, but to add diversity and talent. The foreign talent programme is expected to be aggressively promoted beyond traditional sources such as China and India.