

# *Foreign manpower: The most worrisome fault line in Singapore*

The debate over foreign manpower highlights the difference between official reality and the lived reality of local workers facing pressures from foreign competition

[Chua Mui Hoong](#)

Associate Editor

Catching excerpts of the marathon debate on foreign manpower policies, I was reminded of what it was like in the early 2000s covering parliamentary sessions.

MPs would rise to their feet repeating the woes of citizens over excessive immigration and crowded public spaces. And the minister in charge would rise in turn to take aim at the arguments and shoot them down, methodically and firmly, if politely.

Why are there so many foreigners in Singapore; Singapore is too crowded, the buses and MRT are stifling; housing prices are going up too fast with a rapidly growing population, MPs would intone, surfacing concerns of constituents.

Official answers: Singapore needs more workers to grow the economy. The world is globalising fast and recovering from the downturn. We want to be among the first to catch the wind, and

must trim our sails accordingly. Singapore must be open to the world.

I believed the Government's explanation on why Singapore had to remain open to the world, and how it could not ease up on importing workers to grow the economy, because its version matched my lived reality then.

I remember one conversation with a friend complaining of the overcrowded MRT and the stress she felt from the long commute each day. As I tried to justify the open-door policy, her final rebuttal to me was this: "You drive, you don't even take the MRT, you don't know what it is like!"

Years later, when the sentiments reached boiling point, and were cooled after the 2011 General Election with a slew of policies that took those concerns seriously - ramping up housing and transport services, slowing down the pace of immigration - I apologised to my friend in a subsequent conversation for ignoring her views, and said she was right all along.

I recount this episode from the past because I fear Singapore is embarking on a similar path.

Debate on the foreign manpower issue is taking a turn that reminds me of the past, with concerned citizens voicing anxieties over job security that risk being dismissed as populist.

The parliamentary discussion on Tuesday is a case in point.

Non-Constituency MP Leong Mun Wai, from the Progress Singapore Party (PSP), filed a motion calling on the Government "to take urgent and concrete action to address the widespread anxiety among Singaporeans on jobs and livelihoods caused by the foreign talent policy" and by provisions in "free trade agreements (FTAs)

like the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (Ceca)". Ceca refers to the Singapore-India free trade agreement.

Finance Minister Lawrence Wong counter-proposed a motion that acknowledged Singaporeans' anxieties over the issue, affirmed the need for Singapore to remain open, asked the Government to press on with policies to secure the livelihoods of Singaporeans, and "deplores attempts to spread misinformation about free trade agreements like the Singapore-India Ceca, stir up racism and xenophobia, and cause fear and anxiety among Singaporeans".

The two motions were debated together but voted on separately; Parliament defeated the first and upheld the second.

The polarised framing in such a manner was a pity, because the issue of anxieties over foreign manpower is an important one that needs to be dealt with sensitively yet firmly.

The Workers' Party, taking a centrist stand, took active part in the debate, with its MPs speaking on the issue; but they voted against both motions after their proposed amendment to the second motion (to add a clause for the Government to "proactively release information on jobs and employment prospects of Singaporeans") was turned down.

## Fault line of different realities

My main takeaway from the debate was noting how wide the gulf seems to be, between the official line on this issue and the concerns of Singaporeans raised by MPs.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in his National Day Rally speech last month highlighted three fault lines to watch out for: the wage gap; the gap between locals and foreigners; and over race.

I would add a fourth, which is becoming endemic and can become dangerous: the fault line over different lived realities, evident in the debate on foreign talent and on other issues.

Although the Government has made substantive changes to its foreign manpower policy, these do not appear to have assuaged the concerns of Singaporeans over foreigners displacing locals, judging from the continued chatter over this issue. The Government has tightened criteria for hiring foreigners on various employment passes; introduced a Fair Consideration Framework to ensure employers give due consideration to locals; and promised to legislate anti-discrimination guidelines in the workplace.

Despite these, there remains a perception that the Government doesn't understand, or is not sympathetic enough to, concerns over foreigners taking away local jobs.

I say this not to be divisive, but out of concern because this kind of gap in empathy hinders cohesion.

Sociologists teach that reality is a social construct, which basically recognises that each of us experiences life differently, depending on our social conditions.

A person's "lived reality" is often contrasted with "official reality" - the version of life and truth that hews to an official narrative.

Mr Wong argued that the Government's economic policies have raised living standards across the board and created many good jobs for Singaporeans. "Our children... are benefiting. They are doing the jobs of the future, not the past."

He added: "What I've described so far are not just abstract figures. They reflect the lived experiences of the vast majority of Singaporeans, whose lives have improved as a result of our policies."

The lived realities of most Singaporeans, according to this view, is that things are getting better for Singaporeans and their children.

The problem arises when some local workers feel their lived realities do not gel with such stories, or that the official version makes light of their job fears and their struggles to make ends meet.

Workers' Party MP He Ting Ru urged the Government not to dismiss the concerns of citizens over foreign labour: "The listening ear of the Government needs to be attuned to, and prod at, the genuine concerns behind why some of us feel the way we do so strongly, sometimes in the face of endless explanations" of government policies on the economy and the need for FTAs.

She pointed out that "lived realities on the ground could be very different to ours" - in effect acknowledging the gap in social reality that exists between legislators (including those from opposition parties) and the people they legislate for.

The Government should not dismiss those who voice concerns over rising foreign workforce numbers as xenophobic; and people should not criticise those who argue for remaining open to talent as "sell-outs", she said, calling for a more nuanced and open-minded middle ground to bridge the divide.

To be fair to the ruling party, its MPs and ministers are alive to the lived realities of workers. Labour MPs have for years campaigned for higher wages and more protection for less-skilled workers, with some success. A major initiative to raise low-waged workers' pay is under way, as is one to improve the lot of gig economy workers.

Manpower Minister Tan See Leng acknowledged on Tuesday that while most local PMETs (professionals, managers, executives and technicians) had positive outcomes, "we must not neglect the lived experiences of the minority who have not. Their experiences are equally valid too".

He added drily: "It is not just the PSP who talks to Singaporeans. I meet them too, and hear their concerns."

He singled out older PMETs as one group he is concerned about. Many fear job losses as their skills become obsolete. Dr Tan released figures showing that the unemployment rate for older local PMETs started rising faster than for all PMETs from about 2015. It is now 4.3 per cent for those aged 50 and above, compared with 3.5 per cent for all local PMETs. The higher rate is due to technological change and competition from younger Singaporeans with more updated skills, rather than from foreigners, he said. This was why the Government stepped up skills training from 2016, he added.

## Credibility and empathy gap

Different lived realities can create barriers in understanding that develop into policy blind spots on policymakers' part, and into personal prejudice and bias in individuals who then dismiss official narratives.

When this happens, a gap of credibility and empathy develops between people and government.

What can help bridge such a gap?

First, good, timely information.

General figures on economic growth and income growth are helpful. But even more relevant is data on specific pain points people experience.

For example, the issue of intra-corporate transferees (ICTs) surfaced last year, with some people speculating that a large number of professionals from India entered Singapore via this "back door" route when their companies transferred them from India to Singapore. After some weeks, the Government released the figures for 2020 showing that only 500 of the ICTs were from India.

This led to more surmising that the 2020 figure was low because of pandemic travel restrictions and early figures were not disclosed because they were much higher. On Tuesday, the Ministry of Manpower released data showing that the annual number of ICTs from India from 2016 to 2019 ranged from 300 to 600, hardly the flood feared.

A prompt release of this data last year would have nipped months of speculation in the bud.

Information vacuums encourage suspicion and seed conspiracy theories. Without hard facts, people are more likely to believe anecdotal accounts of displaced locals and less likely to accept official narratives.

Leader of the Opposition Pritam Singh on Tuesday urged the Government to "share detailed facts that matter to the people, and not only consolidated facts that broadly support the Government's position".

Information can bridge the credibility gap that arises when suspicious citizens question government policies.

The other gap to be bridged is the empathy gap.

The hard truth is that policymakers' lived realities when it comes to the threat of foreigners taking away jobs is completely at odds with that of citizens in sectors facing external competition.

Civil servants and politicians do not face competition from foreigners, as these roles are for Singaporeans only. Operating in a domestic environment insulated from job contest by foreigners, policymakers need to work doubly hard to empathise with and understand the concerns of citizens over foreigners taking away their rice bowls.

In pre-pandemic times, they had more opportunity to do so via Meet-the-People Sessions and frequent meetings of constituents.

Many of these interactions have been moved to virtual settings. Many officials now work from home, in comfortable environments, and may move about in private cars or taxis.

The social distance between those making decisions and those for whom the decisions are made may be wider than before the pandemic.

Again I state these factors not to widen the gulf, but to stress the need for greater effort to understand and empathise with the feelings of Singaporean workers on this issue.

Policymakers must be mindful to bridge the gap in empathy that comes from having different lived realities, and ensure that policies and the way they are communicated speak to the hearts of the insecure.

Job insecurity that feeds into resentment of foreigners is a worldwide issue in societies buffeted by similar forces of technological change and globalisation. A sense of disconnect can grow between the struggling class and the ruling class and this can rupture a society.

In the mid-2000s, that disconnect translated into a loss of seats for the ruling party in 2011. In Parliament on Tuesday, Mr Wong said the People's Action Party is prepared to fight the next election on this issue of remaining open: "As Mr Ong Ye Kung (the Health Minister) said in July, we are prepared to fight the next election on this issue; we are prepared to fight any party that chooses to take a populist line and stirs racism and xenophobia."

The next election is not due till 2025, but already the foreign manpower policy is shaping up to be a hot-button issue. The battle lines are being drawn.

But political slugfests are not helpful in addressing Singaporeans' concerns. So while the PAP wants to call out parties that are xenophobic, it should do so without making citizens who fear foreigners taking their jobs feel devalued.



Citizens need to know that government leaders feel their pain, and will take action to protect their jobs on their homeland. They want to feel secure about their place here.

Judging from this debate, government leaders are trying hard to acknowledge the lived realities of Singaporeans concerned about job competition from foreigners. The best way to soothe Singaporeans on this issue is to speak to the heart and the head: address the emotional content of their fears, and have workplace policies to put Singaporeans first.

The worst way is to dismiss their fears as populist.