

## Zero tolerance for intolerance

# Singaporeans should speak out against xenophobia even if it's currently the unpopular thing to do

By Tessa Wong, The Straits Times, 30 Mar 2013

ONE of the more notable aspects of our Prime Minister's National Day Rally speech last August was his call for a more gracious society.

Among the problems PM Lee Hsien Loong singled out was xenophobia, and the need for more people to stand up against it.

[Noting the proliferation of nasty posts and websites devoted to "tormenting and berating" foreigners, he said: "Very few people stand up to say this is wrong, shameful, we repudiate that. I think that is no good."](#)

Seven months on, the pushback against xenophobia is still nowhere close to gaining steam. In fact, it is the opposite.

Online, there is now an increasing distrust among netizens of those who rebut xenophobic remarks. More often than not, they are branded as "Pappies", a pejorative term used to describe a PAP supporter. Worse, they can sometimes be accused of being "anti-Singaporean".

While integration was a buzzword just a year ago as our political leaders sought to encourage a wider acceptance of foreigners, it appears they have eased their foot off the pedal. These days, they are more likely to spout phrases such as "Singaporeans first" and champion the rights of "born and bred Singaporeans".

Why has it become so hard to address the intolerance of foreigners? One of the main reasons perhaps is the [White Paper on population](#) released earlier this year. Many Singaporeans were spooked by the 6.9 million population figure revealed in the paper, which prompted fresh anxieties about competition for resources.

With some still harbouring the perception that the Government wants to bulldoze its way to 6.9 million by 2030, some perceive the message of tolerance as a way of promoting the Government's agenda and sweeping under the carpet legitimate concerns about overcrowding.

It is of course not wrong to draw clear distinctions between citizens and non-citizens, and ensure Singaporeans are not disadvantaged when it comes to getting jobs and a roof over their heads.

But surely that must also be accompanied by a continuing promotion of acceptance of newcomers who, in all likelihood, will become an integral part of society.

**Instead of retreating in the face of cynicism, leaders and citizens alike need to redouble efforts at addressing xenophobia, in a newer and more nuanced way.**

It is no longer enough to simply urge Singaporeans to play nice and be more tolerant, which can come off now as shallow and even patronising.

There needs to be further penetration into the discourse of xenophobia, pointing out misconceptions and fallacies, and addressing them in a substantial way.

I can cite three.

The first is that xenophobia - be it hate-filled invectives or ungracious behaviour towards foreigners - is merely nationalism.

Xenophobes never like to be called xenophobes; instead they prefer the friendlier and more patriotic-sounding term "pro-Singaporeans".

Those who indulge in this masquerade should be called out, as this behaviour seeks to protect Singaporeans' interests and identity using a negative "us versus them" mentality.

A classic example of this was the initial aggressive tone of the Cook A Pot Of Curry Day incident in 2011, where a group of Singaporeans started a Facebook campaign calling upon "true-blooded natives" of Singapore to cook curry one Sunday to "show (foreigners) we will not be coerced".

Following concerns that it would stoke xenophobic feelings, organisers renamed the event Cook And Share A Pot Of Curry Day. They also urged participants to use the opportunity to share Singapore's food culture with foreign friends - an example of a more positive way of defining Singapore's identity.

The second fallacy is that it is not xenophobia when you have a good reason to hate foreigners. This has to do with a common definition of xenophobia as an unreasonable hatred of foreigners.

The argument goes that since they have valid reasons for resenting foreigners for competing with Singaporeans for opportunities and resources, they are not being xenophobic. It is natural to feel anxious about losing out to someone else. But this kind of dishonest rationalisation ignores the fact that a large part of xenophobic sentiment online is made up of rude and hurtful remarks.

Should we then allow people a free pass to indulge in hate speech, just because they feel they have good reasons to do so? Of course not.

Lastly, some like to think xenophobia is a necessary evil in the ongoing political maturation of Singaporeans.

This kind of thinking became more prominent during the Feb 16 [White Paper protest at Speakers' Corner](#), when a blog post listing essentialist stereotypes of foreigners, written by organiser Gilbert Goh, was circulated online. A picture of an attendee carrying a placard stating

"Singapore for Singaporeans", a phrase that echoes the sentiments of Western ultra-nationalist right-wing groups, also went viral.

In the online discussion that ensued, some argued that xenophobia and racism are inevitable by-products of a process where Singaporeans become more politically aware and exercise their civil rights.

This is perhaps the most troubling of all the misperceptions put forth about xenophobia, for it takes an "ends justifies the means" approach. It trivialises xenophobia, and urges tolerance for it.

The truth is there can be no justification for hating another person for being a foreigner, and this kind of discriminatory behaviour should never be allowed to take root in a Singapore that has always been open and tolerant of many faiths and races.

This is a message that needs to be reinforced over and over again, no matter the political climate, no matter how unpopular the message may be, by citizens and leaders alike.

In his National Day Rally speech, PM Lee asked Singaporeans: "What sort of people do we want to be?"

It is a question that we ought to ask ourselves the next time we encounter xenophobia.