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THE 'ABSENT CITIZEN'

Time we learnt to let go?

Letter from Kwan Jin Yao

I READ with interest the Weekend Voices commentary "Engaging the absent citizen" (March 6-7) by Eugene K B Tan.

The advent of globalisation has brought about heightened communications and enhanced mobility, encouraging Singaporeans to venture into different parts of the world for work and study. It is not a coincidence that many of these individuals are the creme de la creme of the Singaporean population; students and professionals who excel in their respective fields and possess tremendous potential and abilities.

It is disheartening to hear that many of these citizens make the decision to remain abroad instead of returning — after all, Singapore is a place that has done much for them in their formative years. Mr Tan seems to attribute the trend of an increasing number of "absent citizens" to the fading sense of belonging — exacerbated by extended periods overseas — as well as the mantra that the grass is greener on the other side.



Logically, it seems natural for the Singapore administration to put in place additional initiatives and programmes to increase the modes of engagement, constantly reminding them of their roots. The premise of Mr Tan's contention seems to revolve around his conviction that "the birthright of citizenship alone is not enough to bond a person to Singapore".

But is this really so? Is it right to perceive that citizenship is merely another expression of identity? Why the need for elaborate efforts to convince them that Singapore is their true home? In the first place, if their personal commitment to the country was in any doubt, why make the effort? For any true Singaporean, the innate sense of belonging does not need to be stimulated by external efforts, simply because our love for this country stems from within. Imperfections are aplenty and this nation still has a long way to progress, but no matter where we might be, a true Singaporean will never quaver when asked about his citizenship. By all means, allow the current programmes to connect overseas Singaporeans back home to remain in place. These activities are for individuals who have the intention to return home someday soon. But for those who no longer have Singapore in their heart, we must learn to let go.

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