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# S'pore needs collective wisdom, mindset change as population ages

FROM **GEOFFREY KUNG KUO-WOO**

Mr Ng Ya Ken's letter "Ideas needed to reset the Republic's vision" (March 20) has many good suggestions for Singapore in the next 50 years. For instance, we must "maintain a certain level of dignity for our seniors".

The report "Active, healthy seniors an engine for S'pore's growth: Gan" (March 20) also highlighted Minister-In-Charge of Ageing Issues Gan Kim Yong's vision of a more mature population.

Singapore's ageing population is a phenomenon obvious to politicians, planners and all Singaporeans.

Budget 2015 steers towards Mr Ng's and Mr Gan's vision by "trying to adapt policies to our changing demographics and the changing times", as Mr Ee Teck Siew termed in his letter "Robin Hood' inappropriate description of Budget 2015" (March 20).

But to achieve whatever vision,

we need not only solutions but collective agreement and commitment to change mindsets and social behaviours. We need the young, the soon-to-be-old and the seniors respecting one another for their respective characters and strength.

For example, it is difficult for elderly people to actively age and feel young when everyone addresses them as "uncle" or "auntie". I felt less old when I was addressed as "big brother" (in Cantonese) in Hong Kong.

Somehow, being called "uncle" makes me feel passe and no longer independent. If we believe that years of experience gather wisdom, then we should use our collective wisdom to chart the course for the next 50 years.

Over the past half-century, I have observed a change in our population. The emphasis on academic excellence in our early nationhood has enshrined scholars in our governing echelon.

While this is not a problem in itself, to exclude non-academic talents, and lose the diversity that represents

the full spectrum of the population, is a problem.

Our efficient Civil Service has been tuned to execute policies coming from our precious limited pool of scholars. This has served Singapore well and we have gained worldwide respect for being highly efficient. This has built up pride for Singapore.

The fall of almost every dynasty in history, though, has been because of pride. With an opportunity now for Singapore to take a step back to reset its vision, the Government and Civil Service should take the lead to harness collective wisdom.

Mr Gan mentioned the need for employers to change their mindset. This would include the biggest employer in Singapore, the Public Service. But what about employees and retirees? Would not seniors know the ageing phenomenon best? I would go as far as to suggest that certain job categories in the Civil Service, such as counsellors, trustees and advisers, to name a few, should be for seniors.

## Don't ignore foreign workers' welfare in pursuit of profits

FROM **HAN MING GUANG**

After reading the report "Foreign workers 'served unappetising, stale food'" (March 20), I am appalled about the treatment of our foreign workers and what they have to eat despite their punishing work.

These workers are not here as slaves, but to help in Singapore's economic and infrastructural development. They should be treated with the respect any human being deserves.

Having spent a long, hard day under the sun, the least these workers should expect are nutritious and tasty meals. Instead, they are receiving unhealthy food. This contravenes food safety regulations.

The basic welfare of foreign workers should never be overlooked in the pursuit of profits. If Singaporeans would not want to eat rancid food, our foreign labourers should not have to as well.

If Singapore wants to be known as a developed, caring society, we must not allow these labourers to be ill-treated and exploited in such a manner. They deserve better. The Manpower Ministry and the National Environment Agency should take action against errant employers and caterers.

FROM **KWAN JIN YAO**

The poor meals offered to foreign workers, revealed in the report "Foreign workers 'served unappetising, stale food'" (March 20), is a symptom of broader exploitation in Singapore, made more evident by the responses of the employers and the food caterers.

They appear to be more concerned about their financial performance, low-margin operations or pushing the blame around. The workers' welfare seems to be the least of their concerns.

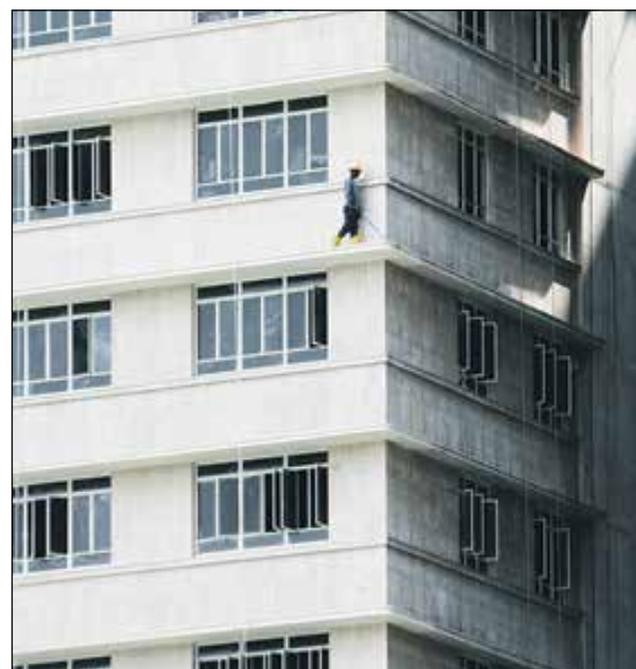
Employers justify the need for catered meals to reduce the "risk of work accidents", since their migrant workers used to skip lunch to save money. ("Netizens outraged over foreign worker meals"; March 21)

This would be justified only if the amount these workers pay — more than S\$100 a month for three catered meals a day, those interviewed said — is used solely for the meals.

On the other hand, the caterers lament the need to stay in the black and rail against illegal operators who "compromise on quality to cut corners", therefore compromising on the workers' well-being. Somewhere, profits are made at the workers' expense.

Little is said about the poor re-

## Fair to provide meal allowances until workers' low pay addressed



muneration foreign workers are offered and little fuss is made about living conditions in some dormitories where "the cooking facilities ... are inadequate". If they could afford to, these workers who graft under exhausting conditions would not scrimp on meals.

**If they could afford to, these workers who graft under exhausting conditions would not scrimp on meals.**

TODAY FILE PHOTO

Until this structural problem of insufficient compensation is addressed, providing meal allowances seems to be a fairer arrangement. The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) can ascertain whether the amount given is reasonable and the workers can decide on the purchase of food or ingredients.

If employers still prefer catering, the MOM must work more closely with the National Environment Agency to ensure safe delivery times, storage methods and proper nutrition.

For fear of reprisal, foreign workers may be apprehensive about blowing the whistle. So, through existing spot checks at work sites, imposing heavier penalties could remove financial incentives for exploitation.

The outrage over these poor meals reflects growing awareness of the plight of many migrant workers in our midst, especially with the work of non-governmental organisations.

However, these sentiments will count for little if government action against the perpetrators is not forthcoming. Driven by profits, companies will find ways to maximise their interests, even if their employees' welfare is compromised.

Inaction cannot persist.