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HEADLINE: Why PM Goh did not receive his baby **bonus**

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BODY:

WAS anyone surprised that the Singapore stork failed to bite the Baby **Bonus** bait? Probably not. Not even an exasperated Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, who lamented in Parliament recently that the total fertility rate had plunged yet again to a historic low of 1.42 per woman last year, way below the replacement rate of 2.1.

Despite offering his goodwill baby hamper of cash incentives, paid maternity leave for third child and flexiwork concessions for civil servants two years ago, the stork remained unmoved.

In fact, the number of births last year fell by a further 12.5 per cent, to only 40,000 babies, compared to a yearly average of 48,000 babies since 1987. So why was the stork impervious to all these blandishments? Was the bonus too paltry? Had family ideals been overwhelmed by market considerations? Or was it plain bad timing to broach libido matters in a flagging economy?

A bit of all the above, speculated demographers at an international workshop on fertility decline in Asia, organised last week by the Singapore-based Asian MetaCentre for Population and Sustainable Development Analysis and the National University of Singapore Family Studies Research Programme.

Amid a raging recession which saw rampant retrenchments and rising unemployment which is expected to hit 6 per cent here, the stork was stressed out over boardroom - rather than bedroom - productivity.

As Dr Yap Mui Teng, a demographer at the Institute of Policy Studies, put it: 'With so much concern over being laid off, it is no wonder that having babies in this uncertain environment was something most were willing to put off.'

Recessions, past statistics show, have a dampening effect on the procreative urge. During the 1986 and 1998 economic downturns, birth rates dived to lows of 1.43 and 1.5, from an average rate of 1.7 during that period.

Another case in point is Sweden, which bolstered its birth rates successfully from 1.61 to 2.13 in the 1980s through generous child allowances and subsidies. Alas, once the recession struck in the early 1990s, breeding beat a hasty retreat to 1.5 and stayed there.

What dented Mr Goh's hopes of a baby bonanza, fertility experts say, was also the slow but sure erosion of the concept of lifetime employment and the emergence of the new 24/7 market over the past two years.

During his keynote speech at the fertility workshop, Australian demographer Peter McDonald explained: 'Like the market itself, life for the workers has become more of a gamble with high stakes.' In a global game that rewards market production, long hours of work and cross-border mobility, families have become a liability 'equivalent to foolhardiness' for any canny player, he said.

As sociologists note, the decision whether or not to have a baby has always fallen somewhere within the triangle of market outlook, state policies and personal priorities. Other than an uncooperative market, the finger was also pointed at the way the state pitched its pro-natal campaign. It smacked of a move by a government-in-a-hurry to do an instant fix of a deep-rooted and endemic problem, say detractors.

In particular, many women dismiss the three-day paternity leave as mere tokenism - enough perhaps for fathers to take a Batam golfing break but surely not to kick-start a bond with their newborn.

Critics also slammed Singapore's Baby Bonus, which grants those having a second child up to \$9,000, as 'characteristically stingy'. This works out to about \$2 a day per child over a six-year period.

Compared with some European countries which spend up to 4 per cent of their Gross Domestic Product to prop up their pro-family policies, they say, Singapore's offering was laughable when set against the huge opportunity cost of having a child here.

It was deemed too little, too late, barking up the wrong tree and attempting to address only affordability - men's concern - rather than how to bring up the baby, which is what concerns women, the main customers.

Beyond lip service, it was noted that little was done to plug the infrastructural gaps which prevent Singapore women from juggling both children and career.

In the past two years, despite repeated calls for more reliable infant- and toddler-care services, the big black hole between the end of maternity leave and the start of pre-school for mothers continued gaping. Not surprisingly, more calls for more sacrifices from women just fell on deaf ears.

Mixed messaging also posed problems. To start with, it was a tricky business for the Government to reverse mentally its explicit 1960s and 1970s 'Stop at two' population-

control policy, to a qualified pro-natalist approach in the 1980s along the lines of 'Have three or more if you can afford it', to today's imploring 'Please consider replacing yourself, we'll even pay you' stance.

The result was latent cynicism to what was viewed as the Government's vacillating and meddling social-engineering attempts over the past 25 years.

Ironically, today's baby campaign is aimed at a generation which grew up among 'Two is enough' slogans in the 1970s. Unfortunately, after being 'brainwashed' for years, many in this cohort - now of child-bearing age - can no longer count beyond the number two.

Many still remember the shame of their mothers who had three or more and the mandatory sterilisations they had to undergo. Sociologists reckon it will take at least another generation to get past this mind-bind.

But what ailed the Singapore stork most of all ideologically are the residual penalties which hark back to the 1970s, when the national priority was to curb rather than coax reproduction.

No attempt has been made to clean the old slate and remove earlier disincentives which were calculated along class lines to prevent lower-income families from over-multiplying.

Most controversial of all is an 'over-breeding fine' or hefty accouchement fees in Class C maternity wards for couples bearing their fourth and subsequent child. Tagged onto the hospital delivery bill, the fee is set at \$400 for each of the first three babies but soars to above \$1,000 for Baby No 4 and beyond.

Its continued presence begs the question: At a time when baby arrivals are drying up, should the Government continue to set limits, rebuff contributions from certain quarters and impose its view on who is qualified to be a mother?

If Mr Goh hopes to get his baby bonus, the Government will have to give an unequivocal message that Every Baby Counts.