Lee Kuan Yew to PhD student, 27, (below) who asked about immigrants and social cohesion:

DO YOU HAVE A BOYFRIEND?
NTU student says: ‘My mind was a total blank’

Her question on social cohesion to Mr Lee Kuan Yew gets answered by questions of his own

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He had a burning question for former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew last night. Given the big influx of immigrants in a short time, and a dilution of the national identity, what can we do to create a sense of belonging and foster social cohesiveness, she asked.

Singaporean Joan Sim (below), 27, a PhD student at Nanyang Technological University’s (NTU) School of Biological Sciences, thought it was a straightforward query and expected an equally direct reply.

She told The New Paper last night: “He’s Mr Lee Kuan Yew. Of course, I expected him to ask me questions. But I thought he would ask what I would do to create a sense of belonging.”

Little did she expect the elder statesman to turn the tables and fire a string of questions at her instead.

And rather personal ones at that.

Following her question, Mr Lee spoke about the fast ageing population.

That, plus the drop in the fertility rate, are major worries for Singapore’s leaders.

Last year, the total fertility rate – which measures the average number of children born to a woman over her childbearing years – was at an all-time low of 1.15.

Mr Lee said: “The birth rate today, the fertility rate, is 1.01. In other words, for every couple, you have 1.01 babies.”

“The Institute of Policy Studies has the grim statistics of 60,000 migrant workers a year to keep our economy going. We can’t digest that. 20,000 maybe, 25,000 – that’s a stretch – but certainly not 60,000.”

The answer, said Mr Lee, is to get couples to have a fertility rate of 1.8 babies or better still, 2.1 babies. Then the population can replace itself.

Education Minister Heng Swee Keat and 1,700 students and faculty members gathered in NTU’s main auditorium to hear the 87-year-old politician give his take on the way forward for Singapore.

Mr Lee paused and looked at Miss Sim. “How old are you now?” he wanted to know.

“Twenty-seven,” she replied.

The queries came thick and fast: Are you married? (No) When will you finish your PhD? (In two years) So you’ll be 29 then. Do you have a boyfriend? (No)

That was when Mr Lee drew attention to the biological clock and a woman’s child-bearing years.

After 35 years old, the dangers of having children with Down Syndrome rises, he said.

“My advice, please don’t waste time. I hope you get your PhD and your boyfriend,” he added.

The audience laughed loudly. Miss Sim turned red.

She told The New Paper: “It was very, very embarrassing. At that moment, I wanted to hug myself and disappear.

“My mind turned into a total blank when he started asking those questions.”

Almost an hour later, Miss Sim still looked shocked when we spoke to her.

“I agree with what he said about how people are getting married later and postponing having children. It’s unavoidable,” she said.

After attending the forum alone, she went home and told her parents what happened.

“What did they say?”

“They told me parents will naturally want their kids to get married... but I’m not in a hurry (to get attached). Let things take their natural course,” Miss Sim said.

Mr Lee also cautioned Singaporeans against turning the current political divide into a national divide.

“As long as the political divide does not lead to a national divide, it will not have much impact on the country’s growth.”

But if it does, Singapore would face constant bickering, like what is happening in the US and Britain.

Then, Singapore would become just “an ordinary country”.

He said that Singapore has had an undivided society so far, and a meritocratic system: “Once we veer away from the meritocratic system, our standards will drop.”

As Singapore grows more segmented with more diverse educational levels, the country will not have the same homogeneous mass of people to rally behind a single policy.

Said Mr Lee: “What’s good for the middle income will be seen by the lower income as unfavourable to them. What is good for the higher income will be resented by the middle income.”

“It is a different society that we face and, therefore, the political leaders will have a more complicated job of getting the society as a whole to accept a programme which is segmented to meet the needs of various strata of society.”

Mr Lee rejects WikiLeaks cable claim

FORMER Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew has rebutted claims in a US embassy cable published by WikiLeaks that he had “characterised Islam as a ‘venomous religion’.”

The cable –marked confidential – related to a visit made by Senator Hillary Clinton to Singapore in July 2005.

It reported that Mr Lee had noted Singapore’s experience in 2001 and 2002 in dealing with Jamaah Islamiah’s terrorist plots.

It then claimed that Mr Lee had also characterised Islam as a “venomous religion”.

In a statement issued through his press secretary yesterday, Mr Lee said: “This is false. I looked up the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ file note of the meeting. Nowhere does it record me describing Islam as ‘venomous’ nor did I say anything which could have given that impression.”

He had talked about extremist groups like the Jamaah Islamiah and jihadist preachers who brainwashed them.

“They are implacable in wanting to put down all who do not agree with them. So their Islam is a perverted version, which the overwhelming majority of Muslims in Singapore do not subscribe to,” the statement said.

“I also pointed out that our Muslim leaders are rational and that the ultimate solution to extremist terrorism was to give moderate Muslims the courage to stand up and speak out against radicals who have hijacked Islam to recruit volunteers for their violent ends.”