A disempowered generation?

BY RACHEL LIN

IN THE midst of all the talk about creativity and vibrancy and buzz, his question came like a cry in the wilderness.

Final-year aerospace engineering student Lim Zi Rui, 23, stood up during the Nanyang Technological University Ministerial Forum last night and asked: Did Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong know many young people no longer felt a sense of ownership in Singapore?

His question was one of several posed during the dialogue with Mr Goh, which ranged far and wide over ageing issues, art, even student accommodation.

"When I was younger, I was very proud of being a Singaporean," Mr Lim said. "But that was about five, 10 years ago. Five years later, with all the changes in policies and the influx of foreign talent, I really don't know what I'm defending anymore."

He said he was reflecting a sentiment held by many of his men in the SAF, who had to compete with foreigners for jobs. "I feel that there is a dilution of the Singapore spirit in youth... We don't really feel comfortable in our country any more."

Mr Goh's reply was one of deep concern. "This is one early sign of danger... If this is happening, it is very serious."

He asked Mr Lim why he felt disconnected.

Mr Lim assured SM Goh that he was still keen to fight for Singapore: "I'm still serving as an officer and I definitely would love to defend Singapore."

However, he compared his attitude to that of the foreign friends he had. "I tell them, this is my country. I can't just leave here whenever I want to. You can come and play and work here, but I have to stay here."

SM Goh responded with a defence of the Government's open-door policy. "You want to have a home. Who's going to build your HDB flat?"

"My brother got engaged, but lost his engagement because he could not afford an HDB flat," Mr Lim countered.

"Without foreign workers in Singapore, would your hall of residence be built?" SM Goh asked. "If we totally reject foreigners, we're going to shrink in size... I don't think Singaporeans want that. What they want is to moderate the inflow of foreigners."

He also said Singapore had to find ways to integrate foreigners. "There are many of them who would like to be Singaporeans, and those of them who can be integrated, make them Singaporeans, make them part of us, make them help to defend the country," he said.

Mr Lim said that his concerns were somewhat different. "My question was, how are we going to help the younger generation feel a sense of belonging to Singapore? I don't think it's about integrating foreigners."

"This is your country," SM Goh replied. "What do you want me to do to make you feel you belong?"

"For my part, don't worry about me," Mr Lim said. "I will definitely do something, if I can, for Singapore. But I can tell you honestly that the sentiment on the ground is a bit different."

"If that is prevalent among young people over here, we've got a real problem," SM Goh said. "If the majority feel they don't belong here, then we have a fundamental problem. Then I would ask myself: What am I doing here? Why should I be working for people who don't feel they belong over here?"

Mr Lim Zi Rui, 23, said last night that with all the changes in Singapore, particularly in policies and the influx of foreign talent, he and many of his peers felt less of a sense of belonging in Singapore. ST PHOTO: AZIZ HUSSIN