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This month Singapore passed a bill that would give legal teeth to the moral obligation to support ones parents. Called the Maintenance of Parents Bill, it received the backing of the Singapore Government. That does not mean it hasnt generated discussion. Several members of the Parliament opposed the measure as un-Asian. Others who acknowledged the problem o f the elderly poor believed it a disproportionate response. Still others believe it will subvert relations within the family: cynics dubbed it the "Sue Your Son" law. Those who say that the bill does not promote filial responsibility, of course, are right. It has nothing to do with filial responsibility. It kicks in where filial responsibility fails. The law cannot legislate filial responsibility any more than it can legislate love. All the law can do is to provide a safety net where this morality proves insufficient. Singapore needs this bill not to replace morality, but to provide incentives to shore it up. Like many other developed nations, Singapore faces the problems of an increasing proportion of people over 60 years of age. Demography is inexorable. In 19 80, 7.2% of the population was in this bracket. By the end of the century that figure will grow to 11%. By 2030, the proportion is projected to be 26%. The problem is not old age per se. It is that the ratio of economically active people to economically inactive people that will decline. But no amount of government exhortation or paternalism will

completely eliminate the problem of old people who have insufficient means to make ends meet. Some people will fall through the holes in any safety net. Traditionally, a person's insurance against poverty in his old age was his family, but this is not a revolutionary concept. Nor is it uniquely Asian. Care and support for one's parents is a universal value shared by all civilized societies. The problem in Singapore is that the moral obligation to look after one's parents is unenforceable. A father can be compelled by law to maintain his children. A husband can be forced to support his wife. But, until now, a son or daughter had no legal obligation to support his or her parents. In 1989, an Advisory Council was set up to look into the problems of the aged. Its report stated with a tinge of complacency that 95% of those who did not have their own income were receiving cash contributions from relatives. But what about the 5% who aren't getting relatives' support? They have several options: (a) get a job and work until they die. (b) apply for public assistance (you have to be destitute to apply). or (c) starve quietly. None of these options is socially acceptable. And what if this 5% figure grows, as it is likely to do, as society ages? The Maintenance of Parents Bill was put forth to encourage the traditional virtues that have so far kept Asian nations from some of the breakdowns encountered in other affluent societies. This legislation will allow a person to apply to the court for maintenance from any or all of his children. The court would have the discretion to refuse to make an order if it is unjust. Those who deride the proposal for opening up the courts to family lawsuits miss the point. Only in extreme cases would any parent take his child to

court. If it does indeed become law, the bill's effect would be far more subtle. First, it will reaffirm the notion that it is each individual's - not society's - responsibility to look after his parents. Singapore is still conservative enough that most people will not object to this idea. It reinforces the traditional values and it doesn't hurt a society now and then to remind itself of its core values. Second, and more important, it will make those who are inclined to shirk their responsibilities think twice. Until now, if a person asked family elders, clergymen or the Ministry of Community Development to help get financial support from his children, the most they could do was to mediate. But mediators have no teeth, and a child could simply ignore their pleas. But to be sued by one's parents would be a massive loss of face. It would be a public disgrace. Few people would be so thick-skinned as to say, "Sue and be damned". The hand of the conciliator would be immeasurably strengthened. It is far more likely that some sort of amicable settlement would be reached if the recalcitrant son or daughter knows that the alternative is a public trial. It would be nice to think Singapore doesn't need this kind of law. But that belief ignores the clear demographic trends and the effect of affluence itself on traditional bonds. Those of us who pushed for the bill will consider ourselves most successful if it acts as an incentive not to have it invoked in the first place.

78. The Maintenance of Parents Bill A. received unanimous support in the Singapore Parliament B. was believed to solve all the problems of the elderly poor C. was intended to substitute for traditional values in Singapore D. was passed to make the young more responsible to the old 79. By quoting the

growing percentage points of the aged in the population, the author seems to imply that \_\_\_

A. the country will face mounting problems of the old in future  
B. the social welfare system would be under great pressure  
C. young people should be given more moral education  
D. the old should be provided with means of livelihood

80. Which of the following statements is CORRECT?

A. Filial responsibility in Singapore is enforced by law.  
B. Fathers have legal obligations to look after their children.  
C. It is an acceptable practice for the old to continue working.  
D. The Advisory Council was dissatisfied with the problems of the old

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