

Work of GPCs should be made more public, say analysts

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Government Parliamentary Committees (GPCs) were first set up by the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) in 1987.

Since then, they have examined government policies and aimed to provide feedback to ministries.

Going forward, political analysts said the work of the GPCs should be made more public, and add to debates on policy issues.

Another suggestion is that the GPCs also come up with regular reports, especially on "hot button issues", that can be useful when the government formulates policy.

Dr Lam Pin Min is now stepping down after eight years as chairman of the GPC for Health.

In August, he will take on his appointment as Minister of State for Health.

He said that having served in the GPC will help him in his work at the Health Ministry.

Last year, one notable contribution by the GPC for Health was its report on healthcare affordability for Singaporeans.

And he had some advice, looking ahead.

"In order for us to formulate policies, and push for changes, we need to have a good understanding of the issue at hand.

"So, it's best we can engage as widely as possible not just within the GPC, but outside the GPCs as well, and once we have all the information as a GPC, we need to sit down, and discuss and agree on a stand on certain issue," said Dr Lam.

Committee members are PAP backbenchers, and some GPCs are supported by a resource panel.

Political analysts believe the GPC system will be better served, if there is wider public knowledge of the committees' work.

"It would be useful if GPCs could put up a report every year of what they have been deliberating on, or also timely reports based on hot button policy areas."

“(The reports could include) what their views might be, what are the views they have gathered from the ground and from experts, and how do they assemble it to make some useful, constructive, extremely relevant offerings to the debate in Parliament and the public debate,” said Dr Gillian Koh, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies in the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

Deputy Speaker of Parliament Seah Kian Peng is another GPC leader who will make way for a new chairman.

He first headed the GPC on Community Development, Youth and Sports, and then the current Social and Family Development GPC.

He agrees the GPC should be more visible to the public.

Mr Seah said: "To a certain extent it's quite true. First of all, we don't deliberately go out to say what we are doing.

“But, I think it does make some sense going forward. It may be good for GPCs to adopt a higher profile, and to share with the public what we are doing, what we are looking at, communicate, and let people know we have this view, and we are taking this up with the government.”

During the early years of the GPC, it was envisaged that members would act as a check and balance in Parliament, challenging the views of Cabinet members.

However, political analysts said this role is less obvious now.

Former Nominated Member of Parliament Zulkifli Baharudin said: "I would say in the past, you tend to see quite an effective GPC precisely because they were given more opportunities in the press for example, to surface some of their ideas.

“But, of recent you can see that with the larger presence of the opposition party, alternative views tend to be carried by the opposition. The GPCs' roles seem to be muted.”

Meanwhile, others see the possibility of a greater role for the GPCs.

Dr Koh said: "What is useful is that it would demonstrate that they (GPC members) are cognizant of the concerns on the ground, they are creative in coming up with policy tweaks or even big policy overhauls, to respond to those concerns.

“And I suppose they wouldn't want to be blindsided by the opposition and what they can come up with, so there is a greater role today for the GPCs of the PAP.”

The committees largely reflect the responsibilities of the various ministries, but they are also evolving.

The last reorganisation was in July 2012, and a new GPC for Culture, Community and Youth was created.

There is also scope for the structure of GPCs to be further improved.

Mr Seah said: "The Ministry of National Development and the Ministry of Environment and Water Resources have traditionally been together. In fact, I think they are two very big ministries. At some point, I think they should have two separate GPCs.

"At the same time going forward -- because we know that now many issues affect multi-agencies, multi-ministries -- perhaps over time the GPCs also need to all come together, and work something out."

GPCs are also seen as a training ground for PAP MPs.

It is a platform for them to prove their mettle, and to demonstrate their potential to become office holders.

Political analysts expect to see more office holders to come from the GPCs.