

## **GE: WP's Sylvia Lim comments on NCMP system**

***Hoe Yeen Nie***

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Worker's Party Chairman Sylvia Lim said the Non-Constituency Members of Parliament (NCMP) system remains flawed, despite allowing for more robust debate.

That's because NCMPs do not get full voting rights, and do not represent any electorate.

At a forum on Tuesday, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had defended the scheme against comments that NCMPs are not "real Opposition".

He said they enjoyed full debating rights, and noted that the scheme allowed Opposition members to establish themselves and gain more visibility among the electorate.

Ms Lim fought her first election in 2006 in Aljunied GRC.

As the best-performing loser, she entered Parliament as an NCMP.

Her team garnered 43.9 per cent of votes against the People's Action Party (PAP) team, and decided to take up the seat after considering the "effect on voters" if they had rejected the offer after a closely-fought election.

Ms Lim is currently the only non-elected Opposition MP.

The scheme was created to ensure a diversity of views.

But without full voting rights, Ms Lim said her role is limited.

For example, she could not vote against a 2007 amendment Bill she felt compromised the independence of the judiciary.

The Bill allowed the Prime Minister to nominate two members into a committee the Legal Service Commission that, among other things, decided on the promotion of district judges.

"If you just imagine at the coming election, we have a situation where Parliament consists entirely of PAP MPs and the opposition is only playing an NCMP role. I think most people would find that to be a regressive step. We are not asking for any indulgence or slack; what we want is an even playing field," said Ms Lim.

"The problem can be cured if the system reverts back to single seats - that's what we've been saying all along. And if the elections were held in such a manner that the boundaries are drawn by independent parties that don't report to the Prime Minister's Office, I think this problem will automatically resolve itself. And Opposition candidates can have an even playing field to come in on their own merits in that sense," she added.

But Ms Lim agrees her time in Parliament has made her more recognisable on the ground, which may translate into actual votes.

Analysts like Dr Gillian Koh also noted that Ms Lim has been "very valuable in creating some sort of debate", whether on the issues of ministerial pay or CPF Life.

Some analysts said the scheme may have even lowered some risk for Opposition candidates.

"The prospects are slightly brighter, if you want to play in this game on the Opposition side. Perhaps that's attracted a few more people into the game, because they know that something might come out of their efforts," said Dr Gillian Koh, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, NUS.

The NCMP scheme has drawn much criticism since it began in 1984.

But analysts said the scheme is here to stay, and in 2010, it was further expanded to guarantee at least nine Opposition seats in Parliament.

Despite their objections, Opposition parties have not yet committed to whether they will reject the seat if offered after this election.

As Desmond Lim, Secretary-General of the Singapore Democratic Alliance said "when we cross the bridge, we will talk about it," but voters "can't have their cake and eat it."

If voters reject the NCMP scheme, he said, they should then vote for the Opposition.

Sebastian Teo, President of the National Solidarity Party said his personal preference is to reject the seat.

"But this all depends on the party, the CEC's position. If a candidate, by not taking up the NCMP seat, would affect the party's position, then I think the candidate has to consider to take up the NCMP," said Mr Teo.

Ms Lim said her party will make a decision when the outcome of the General Election (GE) is known.

"Nobody fights elections to be an NCMP," she said.

On Mr Lee's comment that if the nine Opposition MPs organised themselves and specialised in different policy areas, they could make up two-thirds of Cabinet, she remarked: "I take the cue from that, that what he actually sees is that there is benefit to have a critical mass of Opposition MPs in Parliament to look at some of these issues. So I hope that Singaporeans can take the cue from there and vote in at least nine Opposition MPs."