

## Healthcare, transport on govt's "to-do list" in 2nd half of term

**Olivia Siong**

**Channel NewsAsia**, 13 May 2014

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said it has been a busy 2-1/2 years for Parliament, with debates over various issues such as the White Papers on Ministerial Salaries and Population.

Political observers also said there has been a lot of ground covered in terms of policy reform -- from education to healthcare and housing.

However as Parliament's half-time pause comes to an end, what's next?

The next general election has to be held by January 2017.

Dr Gillian Koh, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, said: "Some people will think that the second half is going to be focused on the government making many more transfer payments, I think that's the significantly cynical part of the public.

"Then another part of the public would probably want to say there have been quite a lot of reforms that have been announced and implemented and we want to see how those details will be fleshed out, how will it actually kind of impact their lives? So for instance, the reforms in healthcare, the housing we've seen prices come down... how does it improve your life?

"So there'll be those looking for money, but there'll be others looking for real social impact and I think the government would want to sort of focus on the more long-term social impact and communicate the rationale of those changes and the implementation so that people will understand what their short-term pain is."

Budgets have also been passed that include major economic and social policies, including the S\$8 billion Pioneer Generation Package that helps to address concerns over the affordability of healthcare for the older generation.

However, there are other areas that need to be addressed.

Dr Lam Pin Min, chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Health, said: "Moving forward for the second half of the term, MOH should look at three other issues. One of which that is in the mind of many Singaporeans would be Medishield Life. I believe the Medishield Life committee is already studying all these issues. What concerns Singaporeans most would be the affordability of the premium as well as the scope and extent of coverage of Medishield Life.

"Secondly, MOH should also look into end of life issues. In the first half of the term, we have addressed affordability of healthcare amongst the pioneer generation, end of life issues is something that we've not talked about, especially in the areas of palliative and hospice care.

"Thirdly, with increased air, land and sea connectivity, infectious disease or contagious disease is something that's at the back of our mind. The recent case of MERS, coronavirus

infection in Malaysia is a wake up call. I think MOH should look into increasing surveillance, both in the hospitals as well as at the checkpoints."

Transport is another area of focus.

MRT services have been hit by several disruptions in recent years -- most notably were two major disruptions in December 2011 that affected more than 200,000 commuters.

Cedric Foo, chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Transport, said: "In the last 2-1/2 years, there is a recognition on the part of the government there has been an infrastructure shortfall, that the demand for infrastructure has actually outpaced the supply. So along these lines, the government has committed S\$60 billion to double our rail network, but this takes time.

"It has also announced plans to tackle the problem in the short-term by way of the Bus Services Enhancement Plan (BSEP) and they have recently announced the Bus Services Enhancement Plan Plus, which means more buses will be added to run parallel or to run as an express bus from the suburban areas to the cities."

When the rollout of the BSEP is completed in 2017, there will be 1,000 more government-funded buses on the roads.

Mr Foo added: "We need to focus on the roll out of the BSEP so that commuters can see immediate short-term improvements in terms of crowdedness and frequency of services.

"On the reliability of train services, you would remember the Committee of Inquiry that was formed to look into the two major incidents and the committee has come up with a very comprehensive report. So I think it's beholden on LTA as well as the two public transport operators to comply and work towards rectifying the shortcomings that have been identified in the report."

There have also been suggestions for Singaporeans to have more say in shaping the country's future.

Denise Phua, deputy chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Social and Family Development, said: "I would like to see a stronger tone of where we are heading as a country.

"I think we should take off from where we have left off at the Our Singapore Conversations, where we spoke a lot about where we would like our society and our country to be -- a more compassionate society, a society that is stronger in economics, a society that will not have people left behind, and a society that has a broadened definition of success and that conversation must not stop.

"I think that conversation must carry on, deeper conversations need to be held and how do we then as citizens and government together co-create the kind of society and nation that we want to see."

But economists stress that economic growth has to continue to be a priority for Singapore to forge an inclusive society.

Associate Professor Tan Khee Giap, co-director of the Asia Competitiveness Institute at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, said: "Meritocracy must continue to prevail and you must also carry the people with you as we continue to move forward to have more economic prosperity.

"You cannot implement meritocracy and you cannot implement an inclusive society if you don't find means and effort on how you can increase government revenue. And if you don't exploit the external environment when it's favourable to us, to make more money, to bring in more government revenue, we cannot possibly continue to incur this kind of government expenditure.

"A responsible government must ensure that all the public policy expenditures can be covered and is sustainable by the way or the rate at which you draw in the government revenue."

Parliament has been prorogued 10 times since Singapore's independence in 1965. This time round, it will reconvene on May 16 with the President's address. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had earlier said that when parliament re-opens, it will discuss strategies to create a better Singapore for all.