

Heated Parliament debates, but did they shed light on key national issues?

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Channel News Asia, 9 September 2020

A week in Parliament following the President's Address - which set out the direction for a new term of Government - saw robust debates on critical issues such as Singapore's foreign worker policies, but the discussions could have benefitted from more data and new ideas, analysts said.

Members discussed important policy frameworks that shape the nation's trajectory, such as labour markets, social safety nets and political development, with "very sharp questions" from both the opposition and the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), said deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Gillian Koh.

"There was a sense that all were committed to a thorough, constructive, pragmatic and long-term approach to debate on policy and legislation," she said.

But she felt that there could have been more hard data to ground the discussion on.

"What was a bit difficult was the balance between empirical data and the points of principle – when the opposition wanted to go with hard data, often, the government ministers responded with points of principle. I am sure that there will be other times when the government ministers want to go with hard data, and the ones raising the issues are going to points of principle," she said.

While more than 70 Members of Parliament spoke on a wide range of issues, with many touching on their "pet topics", some clear themes and points of contention emerged. These included policies on foreign workers, the Progressive Wage Model versus having a minimum wage, and issues of race and politics.

Mr Leonard Lim, country director for Singapore for government affairs consultancy Vriens & Partners, felt that the debate around certain issues, especially that on implementing a universal minimum wage, suffered from a lack of substance.

Sengkang GRC MP Jamus Lim of the Workers' Party (WP) had argued passionately for a minimum wage in his speech, drawing clarifications from six PAP MPs, including Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam.

Dr Lim, an economics professor, roundly defended his stand but did not give a number when asked what a possible minimum wage could be, although the WP's manifesto had proposed to set it at S\$1,300. During the debate, Dr Lim proposed setting up a national commission to understand and study the issue.

Mr Leonard Lim said that such economic-centric proposals would benefit from having some hard numbers or data as a starting point for discussion. Without the numbers, such as the possible level of minimum wage, it is challenging to advance the discussion beyond an ideological or moral one, he said.

“The Jamus episode has demonstrated that each WP MP, as well as the PSP (Progress Singapore Party) NCMPs, should expect to defend their ideas amid very dogged follow-up questions not just from one or two PAP backbenchers, but possibly more, and with political office-holders jumping into the fray as well,” he said.

Political analyst Eugene Tan, a former Nominated MP, said that while debates were substantial, there is a need for new perspectives and ideas.

“When you dissect the issues of foreign manpower, race and religion, we could do with new insights and more discussion on solutions,” said the Associate Professor of Law at the Singapore Management University.

“RESPECTFUL ENGAGEMENT”

A notable exchange from the dozens of hours of proceedings that ran from Aug 31 to Sep 4 was that between Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and WP chief Pritam Singh, not least for being the first head-on debate between them under the new rules of engagement established after Mr Singh was made Leader of the Opposition (LO).

As LO, Mr Singh is given the right of first response and to ask the lead question to the ministers. The two politicians engaged in a vigorous debate on whether opposition supporters who voted tactically were “free riders” and the WP’s intent in asking for the size of Singapore’s reserves.

Assoc Prof Tan said that it was a “powerful display of respectful engagement even as both leaders stood their ground”.

“It demonstrated that it is possible to have a robust exchange of views with the competing, or even conflicting, positions clearly articulated,” he said.

Former NMP Walter Theseira said that it was “highly significant” that the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition exchanged views directly after Mr Lee’s speech.

“While I think we are a long way away from Prime Minister’s Questions as seen in the UK, I think it is important to Singaporeans that the most senior politicians on either side are able to directly engage each other in Parliament,” he said.

“To be sure, PMQ as in the UK are quite theatrical and sometimes more heat than light, but having some type of regular practice for the PM and LO to exchange views in Parliament could be helpful.”

However, Associate Professor Theseira, who is from the Singapore University of Social Sciences, said that he thinks parliamentary debate does not really allow, in the current Westminster system, for collective decision making.

“There are hardly any decisions now in Westminster Parliaments that political parties have not already pre-decided for their MPs, as a matter of policy, through the party whips,” he said.

“This is not a problem with the Singapore Parliament ... In short, most votes, in parliamentary systems today, are far too important to be left to be decided by the vagaries of debate.”

If Parliament wants to scrutinise issues such as foreign worker policy in greater detail, it has the option of forming a Parliamentary Select Committee and then debating the findings of the committee in a motion, he said.

However, Dr Koh said that Parliament was the right and effective channel for the ambivalence about Singapore’s foreign labour policy to be articulated and addressed, even if a full and complete solution could not be agreed upon.

“This helps the public believe that the channels of representation and to surface issues that the national community feels strongly about exist and are effective,” she said.

“With repeated exchange, the public and the stakeholders as well as leaders will get a better grasp of the concerns on the ground, come up with a more appropriate calibration in the policies, and land on solutions that achieve several key competing goals for the long-term benefit of the country and as many Singapore residents as possible.”

MPS SHOULD NOT SHY AWAY FROM EMOTIVE ISSUES

Analysts said that the wide range of issues raised and substantive debates in Parliament’s first sitting may be a taste of things to come, but it’s still too early to tell.

“Some MPs may take liberty with the relatively open agenda and the cordiality in the first sittings to ‘test waters’,” said Assoc Prof Tan.

“But it is good and necessary for Parliament to be the main platform for such hot-button issues to be raised, for the articulation of the diverse viewpoints, and for the policy options to be laid out openly for Singaporeans to understand and ponder over.”

Some issues – including citizenship, locals versus foreigners, as well as race and religion - will by their nature be more emotive, said Mr Lim. However, MPs should not “shy away” from raising these matters when the occasion or domestic environment calls for it.

“The point is to approach the issue responsibly and constructively rather than seeking to be populist,” he said.

Dr Koh said that the act of holding the Government accountable so that it has to spell out its position, its rules, track record and plans, is now strengthened with the greater number of duly elected opposition parliamentarians.

“The front bench has certainly responded appropriately too. Rather than close itself off to any questioning, we saw the front bench engage and explain its position and how it was, in their point of view, good for Singapore.”

She said, however, that what is likely to be remembered from these proceedings is “who called voters free riders, Minister of Manpower Josephine Teo’s exchange with Jamus Lim and the issue of whether there are homegrown leaders heading up Singapore’s marquee companies”.

“I think what should be enduring are the policy frameworks that were discussed,” she said.

Mr Lim said that while there will be some debates that may inadvertently descend into “political theatre” and the chances of that happening are higher now that live-streaming of Parliament will eventually take place, it was too soon to tell which way the tone of the discourse will turn.

“One hopes that Parliament continues to be a platform for raising and discussing serious issues concerning Singapore and Singaporeans, without the exchanges taking unfruitful or even nasty turns which would leave a sour taste in the mouth and turn some Singaporeans away or worse, make some not bother to tune in,” he said.

Said Assoc Prof Tan: “There’s every reason to take a deeper interest in parliamentary proceedings. It’s a sign of the times and as we expect Parliament, parties and MPs to raise the game so must the ordinary citizen raise his game too by taking more interest and understanding the many significant issues facing the country at this turning point in our history.”