

Political parties speak out at post-election forum

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The government needs to change the way it consults people to ensure feedback is received early in the process of policy development.

That is the takeaway for Singapore's major political parties, exactly a month after the general elections, which saw the ruling People's Action Party's vote share slip to a low of 60.1 per cent.

Six representatives spoke at a forum, organised by think tank The Institute of Policy Studies, on the topic - "What Youths Want".

The theme of the forum is a reflection of the turning tide seen at the recent elections. About a quarter of the electorate at the recent elections were below 36 years old, born in 1975 or younger.

The PAP's representative at the forum, Desmond Lee, acknowledged the youth vote did cost the party, because more young voters support the idea of an opposition in Parliament. The other factor he said, was "simmering anger" over hot issues like housing and transport.

Mr Lee said: "It's really not touch-and-go politics of the past that will go down with our youths, we expect a lot more engagement. You know when you go round door-to-door, you can just shake hands and walk off. That's possible. But that's not the way to go, we go door-to-door, we go into houses, we speak to young people.

"So I think it's not just the new media that is the way to reach out to young people and get them actively engaged in nation building. It's the old ways but refreshed, it's the pounding the pavements, meeting people and getting them to recognise that we are sincere in reaching out to them and what they say makes a difference.

"I think we need to change the way we consult people when we make policies, it cannot be that when the bill is going to Parliament that you spend a notional two, three weeks to consult. It has to be at its early gestational phases. So that young people, in fact all Singaporeans, feel that our views make a difference and if you can't accept our views, I'd like to know why not?"

So what do youths want? Speakers point to a group with higher ideals, who want a space to exchange opinions, be heard, respected and engaged.

This election, social media like Facebook has been a key tool for engagement. Speakers said the online platform serves to amplify concerns on the ground and acts as a social leveller among citizens and politicians.

The National Solidarity Party's representative at the forum, Nicole Seah, said: "I do think that social media has great potential to go far in promoting debate and discourse in society."

The new MP for Hougang, Workers' Party's Yaw Shin Leong, spoke of how he used Facebook to help a resident who had lost her husband and was saddled with debts.

"I went to social media, Facebook and I put out a call, to create a Hougang Womens' Support network, and to my surprise there are so many out there who are willing to come forward to offer their expertise, their opinions and their pro-activism in wanting to help. I think these are untapped energies."

Participants agree the next phase of governance would be an emphasis on tackling social problems and measuring success beyond GDP growth.

Singapore Democratic Party's representative, Michelle Lee, said: "Singapore is at a place in history where it could establish for generations to come, its place as a social and cultural capital of Asia. If we get it wrong, we could end up regressing in a grim world."

It was a packed forum of about 300 participants and what came out was a sense of hope. The takeaway - that young Singaporeans do want to play a part to make a better home for themselves, no matter which political party they support.