

IPS Briefing Session with Lord Peter Mandelson 16 September 2011

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Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) researchers met with Lord Peter Benjamin Mandelson on 16 September 2011 for a briefing on the political landscape in Singapore after the May General Election (GE2011). Lord Mandelson, a member of the British House of Lords, was the European Union Commissioner for Trade from 2004 to 2008, after which he re-entered the British government as Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and First Secretary of State until 2010. He was in Singapore for the Lee Kuan Yew Fellowship Exchange Programme. The briefing session was chaired by IPS Associate Director Chang Li Lin and featured a presentation by IPS Senior Research Fellow Dr Gillian Koh.

Dr Koh provided a historical overview of general elections in Singapore, highlighting key episodes and electoral strategies employed by the People's Action Party (PAP) and opposition parties over the years.

She then reviewed the findings of the IPS Post-Election 2011 Survey. The study, like the one done after the previous election in 2006, suggested that political ideals mattered the most to voters when it came to their decision at the ballot box. However, materialist concerns had emerged among the top five concerns in



From right: IPS Research Fellow Dr Leong Chan Hoong, Faculty Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser, Lord Peter Mandelson, Senior Research Fellow Dr Gillian Koh and Research Assistant Ms Debbie Soon.

2011, especially among those in the Service Class.¹

The analysis also revealed a shift from 2006 amongst seniors and the youngest voters towards the category of voters who valued political pluralism. Also evident was the movement of many of voters in the 40-49 age group from holding a strict pluralist position, to a more moderate stance of desiring some degree of status quo. While the association of pluralist values with higher socio-economic status was strong,

¹ Service Class in this survey follows the classification of British sociologist Dr John Goldthorpe and includes professionals and managers

the question was whether the support for pluralism had reached a stable plateau or would continue to grow.



With the change in election advertising rules since 2006, the Internet had become an important channel for the mobilisation of support, resources and opinion in GE2011. This made it imperative for the governing party to engage citizens through new media.

Going behind the data, Dr Koh said there were three key drivers of political change among voters. The first had to do with generational change which was confounded by the second which was education. The younger and increasingly better-educated voters tended to value political pluralism and checks and balances on power they felt a healthy polity should have. The third key driver was the socio-economic ramifications resulting from the manner in which economic growth had been pursued in the past decade. The incomes and the standard of living of those in the low to middle income groups had not improved as rapidly as those with higher incomes. The peaks and troughs of the economic cycles, as well as the strategy of relying on foreign labour to buttress growth, exacerbated the sense of insecurity felt by many Singaporeans. The increases in cost

of living reinforced the anxiety that what were considered basics of life might become inaccessible especially for those who were not poor enough to receive state support, yet not rich enough to feel they could achieve the lifestyle they aspired to have. Voters in this situation would wish to remind the Government that it ensures that education, healthcare and housing remain affordable through state policy, rather than an over-reliance on market fundamentalism. Dr Koh noted that the Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong sought to assuage citizens' sense of insecurity in his National Day Rally address in August, and the policy initiatives he announced, like increased subsidies for medicines, and the raising of the income ceiling for access to executive condominiums.

In conclusion, Dr Koh said that the political landscape would be shaped by the government's position on whether it would seek to pursue a strategy of slower but inclusive growth, or rapid growth with more aggressive schemes of re-distribution and social safety nets.

Another challenge would be whether government leaders can engage different segments of the population effectively, each with their particular anxieties and aspirations. In doing so, government leaders would also have to prove that they can do that effectively over the new media landscape.

Reflecting on the presentation, Lord Mandelson said that by any standard, the PAP government appeared to be very responsive and valued long-term planning rather than populism, to the envy of many in today's troubled world. To this, Dr Koh said that each country and citizens had their own base of reference and Singaporeans expected nothing less of their Government and political system.

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