

## **The answers that will come May 6**

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The People's Action Party (PAP) was not returned to government on Nomination Day. It is a testament to the strength of the informal network that has developed among the Opposition parties in Singapore.

They were able to agree to avoid three-cornered fights, to offer Singaporeans a choice of political representatives in more than half the seats on the slate, and make the deal stick. But, one of the least interesting questions to be answered tomorrow is whether the PAP will form the next Government — and you know why.

So what are some of the more interesting questions that citizens hold the answers to?

Top of the list: How popular is Mr Lee Hsien Loong? Over the past three general elections, we have had to use the total popular vote for the PAP as a proxy for the prime minister's level of appeal.

This time, the Workers' Party (WP) has offered us a more complete measure by sending in a team to contest in Mr Lee's Ang Mo Kio Group Representation Constituency (GRC). It will tell us how well the residents feel he has connected with them and is an effective advocate for them. How does a prime minister say "no" to anything when he has all the resources of government to call upon? Or are these residents extremely sensible in the sorts of demands they make on him?

There is no doubt about his stature in the national and even international arena, but what will be the force of the local one on his

standing tomorrow?

Taking him on is a relatively young group of WP candidates whose prize is a different one; it is not the number of votes they will pull. It will be interesting to see what the revitalised WP has to say to the younger, post-Independence generation of voters through them.

What is their own grasp of the zeitgeist of close to 40 per cent of the voting population this time round? What is its reading of the socio-political implications of this demographic trend and the concerns of this part of our body politic?

How different is its approach going to be from the PAP's, where the emphasis has been to broaden the scope for political expression, the spread of educational choices and the opportunities for social mobility?

This will be a useful spin-off from the contest in Ang Mo Kio, I bet. (Or will it be a missed opportunity for the WP?)

The next interesting question is whether "the back door" can get you through "the front door". What are Mr Steve Chia's prospects of becoming a full Parliamentarian after his five years' exposure as a Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP)?

Mr Chia has taken pains to publish his contributions to Parliamentary debate and it serves to indicate his broad gauge, intellectually, his earnestness in service and political stance. (He also did not have the burden of running a town council nor of disappointing residents with shelved upgrading plans.) How much do these points matter to the constituents of Chua Chu Kang or will some other factors matter more? No doubt, some will feel it is not fair to assess the NCMP scheme in this manner because of those

"other factors".

In any case, it will also help to answer the next question of who will be among the must-have three Opposition members in Parliament. I suspect Mr Low Thia Kiang, the incumbent in Hougang, and Mr Chiam See Tong, the incumbent in Potong Pasir, will be among those ranks either as bona fide MPs or "best losers".

Mr Chia has declared he will not want to spend another term as an NCMP: Vote him in or lose him.

We have to recognise that the WP has made a creditable effort at contesting GE2006, and so has the Singapore Democratic Alliance, the ticket that Mr Chia is campaigning on. Each is presenting 20 candidates, and the Singapore Democratic Party, seven. The WP has been working the ground for at least a year in the places it is campaigning.

A lot of analysis has suggested that it is not this election that the WP is gunning for, but what sort of encouragement will the team need to soldier on, if so? How will its greater commitment to its cause be recognised and rewarded?

Will having the resources of the Government on tap be far more critical to constituents? It may be easier to choose your representative on that basis than to have to sacrifice "asset enhancement" and then be recruited as a volunteer to provide social services, or legal aid to keep the costs of running a municipality low. The burden of citizenship, as Hougang and Potong Pasir residents know, weigh far more heavily on them for voting Opposition.

Is the fate of James Gomez an interesting question? Will it be settled by tomorrow? The PAP would prefer it to be so because no

loyal citizen, much less someone aspiring to be Parliamentarian, will set out to "fix" a government office.

The WP is saying it will keep focused on the policy paradigms it wishes to debate and is standing by its man. Whether he was a decoy, there was a last-minute switch or Gomez's "wayang" statement is a cover-up for that switch or his embarrassment, the final vote in hotly contested Aljunied GRC will offer no real clarity on how this affects the sentiments there.

Now that we have seen the end of the by-election strategy, voters, the PAP and the alternative parties have the opportunity to think well beyond the next upgrading programme, and consider the national issues and political ideals each party and candidate represents.

And that is probably the most significant thing about GE2006, compared to the past two contests: A more even balance between the national and the local, between the attraction of party branding and the individual personalities of candidates.

There is a greater complexity this time, as it should be, and it is something that will precipitate a maturing of our democratic society.

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