

## **People, Parties and Possibilities**

**Gillian Koh,**

***The Straits Times General Election 2011 Blog***, 5 May 2011

We are in the final throes of Campaign 2011. The competition has been red hot - from the 'battle of analogies' to the dissection of candidates, from the competing programmes for estate upgrading to the balance sheets of the national reserves and our personal bank accounts.

What is new is the unprecedented level of contest but even more novel, the fact that stalwarts of the People's Action Party (PAP) have been saying they think it is good for the PAP's health and that of the Singapore. Save for Ms Indranee Rajah, Major-General Chan Chun Seng, and Dr Chia Shi-Lu of Tanjong Pagar Group Representation Constituency (GRC), and of course nominated members of Parliament, all the other members of the House will be properly-blooded parliamentarians - they will all have 'won' their seats in Parliament. It will help us shrug off the moniker that we are an 'illiberal democracy'.

Voters have a heavy responsibility ahead of them. Since opinion polls which might otherwise reveal how fellow constituents feel are not allowed in the formal campaign period, voters may assume but cannot be certain that the PAP will form the government after 7th May. What would voters be asking themselves before they check-off on that ballot sheet? Here is what is going through my mind.

Whichever constituency one might belong to, the contesting parties have taken pains to present manifestos on national policies and with prompting in some instances, plans for estate upgrading. For instance, healthcare and housing are policy areas that all parties address from increasing provision to lowering costs and improving accessibility.

How do the parties propose to pay for their respective plans? Take the proposals and do the math. For example, the PAP's formula has been to focus on boosting economic growth, increasing revenue through direct taxes on business, indirect taxes on consumption, property and car sales taxes and tapping net investment returns on the national reserves. The Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) proposes to re-prioritise the national budget, shunting dollars from defence spending to healthcare, social security and some serious economic restructuring. It proposes to tap the national reserves. The National Solidarity Party (NSP) recommends using 80 per cent rather than just 50 per cent of the net investment returns from the national reserves to support their plans.

Let's think: as an ageing society, and an open economy that seeks to ameliorate the tendency towards widening income gaps, the social spending bill is likely to rise, all other things being equal. It stands to reason then that it would be critically important to generate an equally exponential increase in economic value to balance the books. Will that be through the flowering of enterprise? Which group has the best plan for that? How do their proposals on manpower and incomes policies, taxation, and privatisation gel with this imperative? Who will pick up the tab? Fiscal sustainability is an important consideration.

It is the political nature of new social safety net or social assistance programmes that few would want to be seen to resist them, and when they are embedded, that few would ever want to strip out. The quantum of support offered is also always sticky downwards, almost impossible to reduce.

While we have a very competent civil service, the political landscape today is such that a plurality of views and interests will weigh in these debates. These matters will not just be resolved through some technocratic solutions. We will be dealing with the shades of grey of who should get a little more and who, less, and often the intangibles of 'social impact'.

Even if the tide of opinion is that more should be done to shore up policies on wealth redistribution, social safety nets and inclusion, how strong are the political vehicles by which these debates are conducted; how do we arrive at a new working consensus?

For that reason, a second thought comes to mind. It has to do with intra- and inter-party coherence. I would wish to vote with the confidence that the team of my choice enjoys the level of internal coherence to properly operationalise the views that it propounds during the hustings. If not, it would have to make a good defence of why it might modify its position. Not one that might be mired in internal strife.

The most promising teams would be those that demonstrate good party discipline or provide some strong suggestion that they are held together by shared beliefs. It may be naive to take the weeks of informal and formal hustings as proper indication of these but on the other hand, it is on public record that there are candidates that have switched camps mid-way, that some of the teams have been stitched together just in time for this campaign. We recognise too that the PAP is itself in the middle of a generational transition.

This is an important consideration because Singapore's parliamentary system is one that is party-based. In the debate following the untimely demise of Dr Ong Chit Chung of Jurong GRC in the August 2008, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong explained that if any parliamentary seat were to fall vacant mid-term, then the party would step in to take care of the affected constituents.

The scenario to consider is if there is a falling-out among members of a GRC say, in the heat of the debates, voters have to be comfortable too with the broad party programme and not just the particular personalities that they might vote for on Saturday.

There are also few certainties in politics. What you decide on now in terms of policy positions can very well morph into something quite different tomorrow. A truism of course that applies to the PAP as possibly any other party, but it is just something I remind myself of.

Finally, with the far more complex policy environment we face, whether the result of external or internal dynamics of change, I would give good communication and engagement of the public a special premium. The PAP has listed it as one of its six key planks of its manifesto and of course, all the opposition parties are also saying that it is what will distinguish them from the former. There will be diverse interests to take on board with policy issues that cut across each other like the immigration and foreign worker policies, some with almost

mutually-exclusive objectives like in housing when we speak of the interests of first-time buyers of public flats and those hoping to get the best market rate for flats in order to upgrade to something bigger or private.

There is a need for a new model of governance where citizens will have to engage each other directly on the trade-offs they all face when they argue their policy positions. The PAP has mediated among these interests for a long time now, trying to maintain a working consensus across society on a broad range of issues. Parties that wish to negotiate the social compact will have to do the same. So the third consideration is to look for the teams that have demonstrated this facility to connect and convince.

GE2011 has been quite a ride but it is now time to take a deep breath and decide which way we want to land. Vote wisely!

**Dr Gillian Koh is Senior Research Fellow of the Institute of Policy Studies at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, NUS.**