

GE2015 hustings: Let's focus on policy, not political grandstanding

Gillian Koh

TODAY, 31 August 2015

Will the General Election (GE) on Sept 11 be a “watershed election”?

The leading opposition party, the Workers' Party (WP), is contesting 28 seats so it will not breach the one-third threshold of seats that allows it to block changes to the Constitution in Parliament.

The People's Action Party (PAP) probably seeks a higher mark than its 60.1 per cent support from the total votes in GE2011 for its shift to left-of-centre in its policies, and for seeking to strengthen the social compact between the people and Government.

A good mandate would be to return to the 66.6 per cent it pulled in GE2006; a very strong mandate would be better than that.

In his post-election conference on May 8, 2011, the secretary-general of the PAP, Mr Lee Hsien Loong, said that having been returned to power, his party would adapt to the “new electorate” with policies and approaches, a “new formula” to respond to the sentiment expressed in the hustings, the trimmed margin of victory, and the loss of Aljunied Group Representation Constituency.

Two years later, Prime Minister Lee said at the National Day Rally 2013 that the Government was shifting to a new balance between the state, the community and the individual with increased state support to help Singaporeans with housing, healthcare, and education.

Over the years, more help has been given to the poor and disadvantaged, the pioneer generation, and certainly more than before to those in the middle-income group and the sandwich generation.

The Government has helped businesses transition to a labour-tight, productivity-driven economy, starting with the release of the Economic Strategies Committee report in 2010, with the negative political sentiment on what was perceived as an all-too-liberal foreign labour policy pressing the cause further.

The Productivity and Innovation Credit programme and the Wage Credit Scheme are examples of how the Government has tried to temper the cost of doing that.

The Fair Consideration Framework and the Progressive Wage Model (PWM), which provides a skills and wage ladder, in addition to the traditional measures of raising foreign worker levies and the tightening of dependency ratios, ensure additional foreign workers are admitted only if Singaporeans cannot be tapped on to fill job vacancies.

With the PWM being compulsory in three key sectors, Singaporeans working in them can expect a minimum wage at different stages of their career progression, and the sectors outside the regime that tap the same labour pool will have to match those conditions to keep their workers.

Given the weight of these changes, they are a policy-based political signal that the governing party has tried to find that “new formula”.

Yet, looking at the political Opposition's agenda, there seems to be a strong theme around population and immigration issues, which all those initiatives seek to address. Anticipating

this, PM Lee addressed them in his Ho Rih Hwa lecture in June, in a TV interview in July, and in his National Day Rally Speech a week ago.

HOW MANY, AND WHO, ARE IN the OPPOSITION?

Voters should be interested in how the Opposition dissects the Government's policy responses thus far.

Overall, while many say that the PAP is trying to ride on the SG50 dividend and the memorialising of the late founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, others claim that they are not so easily swayed and will consider the policy record and suggestions from both sides.

But, they will also weigh those against the ideal of having some Opposition voice in Parliament.

If Singaporeans believe it is healthy to have some Opposition voice in Parliament; that it makes a governing party more responsive to their needs and accountable for their actions, then with seven opposition Members of Parliament (MPs) versus 79 PAP MPs in the last parliamentary session, they may feel the country can afford a few more of them.

The WP has said that the number should be 20. I wonder how Singapore voters will contrive that number when they go to the polls on Sept 11.

When we think about it, it is not just the number of Opposition MPs there might be that is important, but also who they are.

Will they take cognisance of the broader public good as they highlight the needs of social minorities; will they be rigorous in their analysis of important policy issues; can they hold to what they say, and do and respect the authority of the House; will they be focused on problem solving and not political grandstanding?

This question applies equally to the PAP politicians.

What the PAP will be most concerned about is whether more Opposition voices come at the expense of candidates it has lined up to form the corps of the fourth generation of Cabinet ministers.

The biggest negative for Singapore, however, is if GE2015 is remembered for how politicians try to make their way to Parliament by stoking a wave of xenophobia as they make their claims about wanting an inclusive, compassionate and dynamic society. Let us avoid that at all cost.

Dr Gillian Koh is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.