

PM Lee: Good mix needed for PAP team

Tessa Wong

The Straits Times, 29 January 2013

Reclaiming ground lost to the opposition will require the People's Action Party (PAP) to have a good mix of different candidates, said Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong yesterday as he sketched the key traits needed in his team.

Answering questions on the PAP's future at a forum, after a sobering weekend when the party lost the Punggol East by-election, he said he was looking for three types of people.

They are those who could "click with the crowd", those with the ideas to get things done and those who represent the different streams in society.

"You need people who can identify and click with the crowd. It's a visceral thing. Do I feel like you? Do I like you? Can I connect with you?" he said, in a rare nod to the importance of candidates' charisma.

Establishing this kind of rapport takes time, but "if you have the right man, I'm sure he can do it", said PM Lee at the annual Singapore Perspectives forum of the Institute of Policy Studies, attended by about 800 professionals and academics.

Citing the PAP candidate for Punggol East, Dr Koh Poh Koon, he said he had no doubt the surgeon would have been able to connect with people face to face.

"Unfortunately, he did not have enough time and so he didn't win in Punggol East," said Mr Lee.

Dr Koh lost to the Workers' Party's candidate Lee Li Lian with a score of 43.7 per cent at last Saturday's by-election. Residents have said their unfamiliarity with Dr Koh was one reason they did not vote for him.

Mr Lee stressed that he also needs people with ideas, "who can say, let's do this together, and can get people to work together to make things happen".

Finding both skills in one person may not be easy, he admitted, which is why he is more focused on making sure his team has the right combination. It should be made up as well of people who represent different profiles in society, from grassroots volunteers and professionals to social activists and unionists.

"If I have the right mix of such people, with the right motives, I can make it. It's not certain but that's the way to maximise our chances," he said.

Mr Lee was upbeat as he candidly answered a wide range of questions, about half of them focused on the country's politics and political systems.

When asked about the sharp disparity between the popular vote and seat share, Mr Lee said that unlike Britain, Singapore's political map is relatively homogeneous, which means that "every seat is a swing seat".

"If there's a swing, it's a nationwide swing and today it can be very lopsided one way, tomorrow it can be very lopsided another way," he said.

Acknowledging that it could cause instability in the long term, he said having Non-Constituency MPs and Nominated MPs helped to mitigate the problem in the short term.

He also said proportional representation may not be right for a multiracial society like Singapore's, as it would encourage race politics.

Ultimately, he said the future of Singapore's politics would not depend on just politicians, but also on how society develops. Said Mr Lee: "If a society is divided, the politics will reflect that."