

Apology cuts both ways, political watchers say PM's move impresses some; seen as election ploy by others, they say

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So, did saying 'sorry' work?

That is the question on the minds of many political observers after Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong made a surprising apology to Singaporeans on Tuesday.

The answer, it seems, depends on what the Prime Minister had intended with the apology.

At a lunchtime rally in Boat Quay on Tuesday, he surprised many people when he acknowledged that the Government could have moved faster to address shortfalls in housing and transport.

Mr Lee, who is also secretary-general of the People's Action Party (PAP), also apologised for two other slip-ups: the escape of terrorist Mas Selamat Kastari and the flooding in Orchard Road.

'We are trying our best on your behalf. And if we didn't quite get it right, I'm sorry, but we will try and do better the next time,' he said.

Analysts say that if the apology was aimed at defusing voter anger over these issues, then it has worked to some extent.

And it was especially timely, given that just last Saturday, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew had said Aljunied GRC voters would have 'five years to repent' if they voted an opposition slate into Parliament.

Political risk consultant Azhar Ghani says the move was right out of the PAP's election playbook.

He notes that in past elections, the gloves would also come off in the first three days of the election period.

'But by the half-time mark, the PAP would stop and tell the voters to focus on the issues,' he says.

'This is the same. The apology is targeted at calming voters down, removing the emotions and getting people to study the long-term issues.'

The timing of the apology has led some cynics and opposition parties to call it nothing more than an election ploy to win back angry voters.

'Coming just four days before Polling Day, the timing lends itself to cynicism,' says former Nominated MP Siew Kum Hong. Still, the apology is likely to make an impact on some of the voters, says another former NMP, Mr Zulkifli Baharudin.

'Some of my friends, who are angry voters, said they were really quite impressed that the PM had apologised,' he says.

Political scientist Derek da Cunha points out that much of the discontent seems linked to high ministerial pay, so such an apology may not suffice.

'It may appear to some that there is a disconnect between the way the Government operates and has carried itself on the one hand, and the way many voters view the Government on the other,' he says.

But Mr Zulkifli reckons that voters will see the apology more positively.

He says: 'Let's be honest. Mr Lee will be Prime Minister after Polling Day, and he doesn't necessarily need to say sorry.'

'But he is leading from the front, and this shows that he has the strength of character to admit his government's shortcomings.'

Beyond the current campaign trail, however, the bigger question PM Lee's apology raises is whether it signifies a change in the ruling party.

Is a new, more humble PAP image emerging?

Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan believes so, and adds that the PAP has no choice but to adapt in this way.

'More humility will help them repair ties with the electorate,' he says.

'I am unsure if all the PAP leaders will agree to that, but Mr Lee, as secretary-general of the party, is already signalling that change is inevitable.'

The reality of governing in an increasingly complex world is that there is no 'silver bullet' or perfect policy any more.

Says Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh: 'We will probably need to all temper our expectations, but politicians also have to temper what they should promise and think they can deliver.'