

Issues like gay rights 'may come to the fore in future'

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NON-BREAD-AND-BUTTER issues, like gay rights, will become a vote-changer in future general elections, said People's Action Party MP Hri Kumar Nair. It will be so especially among the young.

Mr Nair was among five panellists who mapped out upcoming changes in the political landscape and future issues during a Straits Times round-table on Wednesday.

"Non-bread-and-butter issues will feature more prominently, going forward," the Bishan-Toa Payoh MP said. "Particularly for the young, for whom these things such as freedom of speech and LGBT rights, are important. They'll want to know what their MPs are doing (about them)."

Similarly, religion would "connect certain dots" between these issues.

He was replying to Institute of Policy Studies research fellow Carol Soon, who had asked about the importance of non-bread-and-butter issues in future polls, and National University of Singapore Students' Union president Soh Yi Da's question on whether religion would play a critical role in shaping policies.

"Same-sex marriage issues are vote-changers in other countries," Mr Nair said, citing the United States, where decisions on gay rights have been made recently. "It's going to happen to us - we are not immune," he added.

It is important for those in Government to take a stand, Mr Nair said, even if it's difficult. He cited the furore that erupted last November over the Health Promotion Board's response on sexuality under its Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section.

A debate ensued on whether some of the information on homosexuality was appropriate.

Mr Nair said: "One side considers it a human rights issue; one side considers it a religious issue. Both want the Government to take a position consistent with their own, so it's a difficult position to be in. "The Health Minister said the FAQs were factual, and (the Government) was not going to do anything about it... (He was) criticised by members of the religious community, but being in Government, you need to take a position."

Political parties too need to take a stand, he said. "Because you're going to make the decisions once you get into power. Every political party in modern democracies makes its position clear... (even if) it knows it is going to lose some votes for it."

But Workers' Party chairman Sylvia Lim said it was "rare to see (non-bread-and-butter issues) as a definitive reason" for unhappiness. The Aljunied GRC MP said two young constituents had told her they were going to leave Singapore "because there was no freedom of speech". "But such cases do not come up as frequently as the immediate issues confronting people day to day," she added.