

## **News Analysis; Rallying the base and drawing in others**

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To win an election, a political party needs to succeed at two crucial things. The first, to fire up its base; the second, to capture swing voters.

The People's Action Party (PAP) is in no danger of losing government, but yesterday, mid-way through its most electorally challenging term in 50 years, it threw precisely such a one-two punch.

First, it rewarded a pillar of its party base. Yesterday's party convention was titled "Our New Way Forward" and could have been subtitled "The Silver Chapter".

Besides announcing the formation of a Seniors' Group on a par with its Youth and Women's wings, headed by Speaker Halimah Yacob and former prime minister Goh Chok Tong, party leaders emphasised repeatedly the debt the PAP owes to its older members.

The Seniors' Group will be a lobby group and a voice for them.

It is timely and strategic, given Singapore's rapidly ageing demographic and the policy conundrums that throws up.

But from a leadership that has always been gripped by renewal and its standing among the young, this was also a surprise and reward for older members who have stayed staunch through decades of benign neglect.

Little wonder that yesterday's largely silver audience greeted the news with the loudest cheers of the day.

Beyond the rank-and-file, that the older generation of Singaporeans in general are the PAP's most loyal supporters is not lost on the party leadership. This segment of the voting base has been told they are not being taken for granted.

The second task, of capturing swing voters, is invariably the harder one.

After the 2011 General Election, an Institute of Policy Studies survey of 2,000 voters saw 45.4 per cent identifying themselves as swing voters, up from 40 per cent in 2006.

Yesterday, the PAP adopted a major resolution, its first in 25 years, that laid out a mission statement for a new generation.

The resolution said that it wanted to build an "open and compassionate meritocracy" that preserved social mobility. It enshrined "a system of progressive benefits and taxes" and pledged to moderate the excesses of the free market.

It was a party-wide riposte to those who charge that the PAP is too elitist and focused on economic growth over social development.

Coming after Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's National Day Rally speech charting a shift towards more state and community support for those in need, it sent the message that the progressive policies over the last few years were not populist handouts.

They were, and continue to be, ideologically and spiritually at one with what the PAP stands for.

In crafting the resolution, the PAP returned to its "democratic socialist" roots and interpreted them anew. It has a history of remaking itself in this way in response to electoral setbacks.

After seeing a 12.9 percentage point drop in its vote share in the 1984 General Election, it embarked on a series of consultations that culminated in an "Agenda for Action" that was adopted as a resolution in 1988.

What that agenda contained is perhaps less important than what happened next. The party agenda was brought to Parliament, where it was endorsed and adopted as the National Agenda.

It is unlikely that this year's resolution will be tabled in Parliament. Besides giving the 10 opposition MPs the chance to lob potshots, such a move risks sparking irritation among Singaporeans who no longer see the PAP's Agenda as synonymous and identical with the country's.

Herein lies the problem which no resolution can solve. For the first time in its history, the PAP no longer has free rein to set the agenda for the country, and then to bring the people along.

While it has shown itself to be impressively responsive once again, this comes years after large swathes of Singaporeans first showed fatigue with the excesses of the free market, immigration and meritocracy. It is a reaction - some would say a delayed one.

Where once the PAP would decide, now it affirms.

This will be welcomed by many Singaporeans, the majority for whom a PAP-less Singapore is still unthinkable.

But whether the one-two punch can deliver a knock-out depends on those unpredictable swing voters, some of whom will take this as reward for their departure.