

Oxley Road: Singaporeans want ugly spat to end, say political observers

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Singaporeans want to put the ugly dispute involving the children of founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew behind them, but the debate in Parliament on the matter has not brought it to resolution, political observers said yesterday.

At the same time, it is unlikely the allegations made against Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong will hold much water in court or people's minds, unless his younger siblings can provide evidence for their accusations of abuse of power in relation to their father's house at 38, Oxley Road, the observers added.

The two-day debate on Monday and Tuesday, in which a total of 36 ministers and MPs spoke, drew mixed reviews from the observers.

Some felt it has put to rest the allegations, with the Government providing clarity on key issues that had previously been topics of contention.

These include how and why a ministerial committee to look at options for the Oxley Road house came to be, and why the National Heritage Board (NHB) had tried to back out of a deal with the estate of Mr Lee over some artefacts from the home.

Dr Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies said the ministerial committee was not a "mysterious or secret" one, as alleged by Dr Lee Wei Ling and Mr Lee Hsien Yang.

"From the debate, we have learnt all the three siblings knew what the point of the committee was, and had responded to it," she said.

On Monday, Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean, who chairs the committee, said Dr Lee and Mr Lee Hsien Yang were informed about the committee on July 27 last year, shortly after it was formed. He also said they were invited to make representations to the committee.

Another issue was on a donation deal between the NHB and the executors of the late Mr Lee's estate.

Mr Lee Hsien Yang, who with his sister are the executors, had complained that the NHB had tried to back out of a legally binding deal to exhibit artefacts from the home.

But Dr Koh said: "We have learnt that the PM was involved not only as a PM but a beneficiary as well, and his consent was not sought for the gift or the terms in the deed. But, in order not to create a ruckus, he had let the whole issue slide."

She added: "So, it was ironic that one side of the equation was calling the other out for not doing it properly, when that side had not conducted itself properly."

Some observers, however, felt that the debate did not probe deep enough in some areas.

SIM Global Education's Dr Felix Tan noted that fewer than half of the 101 parliamentarians spoke.

He said MPs should have grilled PM Lee more, for example, on how he would handle his siblings' allegations of abuse of power since he is not willing to sue them at this point.

"From what I have seen on social media, which I take with a pinch of salt, many people are not satisfied with the debate but just want to see the matter resolved," said Dr Tan.

Ultimately, the debate has not brought the issue to a close.

This is exacerbated by the fact that PM Lee's siblings are unlikely to let the matter rest, said East Asian Institute senior research fellow Lam Peng Er.

"In the coming days, I am sure things will come in dribs and drabs from the siblings on Facebook because they were not represented in Parliament," he said.

"I don't expect Lee Hsien Yang to ride off into the sunset after conducting guerilla warfare."

Political commentator Derek da Cunha said: "Many Singaporeans will likely identify with the Workers' Party's brand of opposition - being constructive and responsible."

The party had prioritised national interest and did not take potshots at PM Lee, he added.

"The WP was prepared to cut the PM some slack on the matter because emotions can run high in family disputes."