

Panellists' reactions to survey

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The roundtable kicked off with the five panellists responding to the survey findings and giving their reading of the mood at half-time.

MISMATCH OF EXPECTATIONS

I think Singaporeans are still harking back to a golden age where growth is double digit and where the buzzword is upgrading. And so long as this is their mindset, they still expect the Government to be paternalistic in terms of material provision and security, but not so much in terms of how it runs the country.

In the past, there was a good match between state paternalism and the aspiration of Singaporeans. But nowadays the world has become much more difficult and risky and Singapore, too, has its own difficult issues like low fertility and ageing population. This makes it difficult for the PAP to be that paternalistic, able-to-deliver government it used to be.

At the same time, Singaporeans now expect a more competitive political system. They want to play the role of critical citizens, they expect more checks and balances.

So the current situation looks something like this to me: A government out of its comfort zone and unable to quite meet the expectations of Singaporeans and a citizenry demanding what the Government could not reasonably deliver, considering the trade-offs, while entrusting the Government with less power than it used to have.

The way forward, in my view, is for citizens to learn to make informed choices, to be aware of the trade-offs, to keep the Government accountable without hindering its capacity to do what is good for Singapore.

The Government will need to know it can't be paternalistic, just as it can't take all the credit or all the blame, but it still needs to provide the leadership and forge a new basis of trust with citizens. It will need to live with a more contentious political environment and perhaps no longer expect a wide winning margin.

- Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser, from the National University of Singapore's sociology department

MOTHER OF ALL ISSUES

I had some issues with how immigration came out in the survey, that the issue was ranked rather low in terms of the different concerns.

I look at immigration as certainly the mother of all issues in our political landscape. You can trace all the different complaints about transport, housing, cost of living, and national identity very much to immigration.

So I think like in 2011 GE, immigration is a dog that didn't bark in the survey. It will be very much in the hearts and minds of voters and candidates in the next GE.

I do think that it will feature prominently. The only question is whether it will manifest as an issue in and of itself or whether it will be fingered in a whole variety of other hot button issues, but certainly it will materially affect how Singaporeans assess the Government.

And immigration is complex and it may not feature so prominently because no political party or candidate wants to be labelled as xenophobic or anti-foreigner; neither would any one party want to come across as a staunch supporter of more immigration. So you'll see the parties continue to gingerly tread around this particular issue.

- Nominated MP Eugene Tan, a law don at Singapore Management University

COSTS STILL VERY MUCH ON PEOPLE'S MINDS

To be fair, I think on the policy front - since the GE anyway - the Government has very visibly been paying attention to social issues and has been saying so.

As far as housing is concerned, it is true that probably for the first-timers who are applying for Build-To-Order flats, it is easier for them now on two fronts. One is that the supply has been ramped up; second, I think there has been some attempt to moderate the price rises of the BTO flats by delinking them from the resale prices.

But at the same time I noticed that the caseload at my Meet-the-People Session... still consists of quite a lot of housing cases... About maybe 40 per cent of the caseload I see is on housing and these are categories of people who are largely not what we call first-timers. So, for instance, they may be divorcees who had bought a flat before, they could be Singaporeans married to foreigners, or PRs who have Singaporean children.

You'll find that there is a certain percentage of homelessness there and issues with getting accommodation.

Moving on to health care, I think we are all aware that because of the overpopulation ... and undercapacity, we are facing issues in the hospitals when it comes to beds.

Costs are still very much on people's minds. The Government has said that they would look into how it could bear a bigger share of health-care bills of Singaporeans. At the same time, we're not too sure right now what it actually means in dollars and cents because as we all know, the MediShield Life review is still ongoing. We don't really know what the coverage will be, how much will be the co-payment premiums.

So there's still some uncertainty there which you can see in the survey findings. At the same time, also, I think people are not sure even if the Government were to bear a larger share of the medical bill, in dollar terms does it mean that I will pay less or more because medical inflation is still there.

- Workers' Party chairman and MP Sylvia Lim (Aljunied GRC)

OPTIMISM IN THE AIR

For the survey, there were actually two different sets of numbers. One set talked about whether things were better or much better or worse or much worse (since 2011). And that's where you have, I think, the low score, for example, for transport. But there's another set of numbers which talked about confidence levels.

By and large, in almost all categories except one, and I'll come to that, the respondents felt more confident in terms of what's going to happen in the future compared to the numbers assessing the current standards. So for example, 72 per cent felt that the Government was doing better or much better on elderly issues but 77 per cent were confident that it will get better in the future.

So transport, only 39 per cent said better or much better but 53 per cent said (they are) confident or more confident that it will get better in the future. There is a realisation that not all problems can be solved straightaway, and also an appreciation that things are being done that will lead to better outcomes.

Optimism is very important. You should never underrate it.

So for almost every category, confidence was higher, except one, and that was on foreign workers. That's the only category which fell below 50 per cent - 38 per cent felt they were confident or more confident that things would get better.

But the numbers who felt it will get worse or pessimistic in the future, it was 22 per cent. So far more, almost double the numbers, felt that it will get better in the future on foreign workers.

- People's Action Party MP Hri Kumar Nair (Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC)

DIFFERENT GROUPS HAVE DIFFERENT ORIENTATION

Let's start off by what matters to people when they go to the ballot box. This reinforces the IPS general election survey. Whatever you do, there is a proclivity among those in the higher socioeconomic class to value political pluralism. But when you look through the segments with age and all the other aspects, national policies come up best, come up most of the time. Next one would be candidates' attributes.

Policies and performance matter desperately. There is no running away from that. That's like base line.

However, do all population segments want the same thing? And you always see the tensions.

In terms of age, what you find are those in the 45 to 54-year-old category are less approving of how the Government has handled all the issues across the board, except for education, when you ask them about today.

But when they are asked about their confidence, well, bounced back up. So it's only in the areas of the elderly and foreigners they're not too sure.

Now, look at another age category - the 35 to 44. They are sort of less approving than the average of how the Government is doing now in the areas of the elderly, the poor, health care and transport. But when you ask them about the future, they are less likely to express confidence than the other groups in the areas of the poor, health care, housing and transport as well as foreigners. So you see how different groups are different in their orientation.

We as a country want greater checks and balances, more alternative views, a higher level of political pluralism. But if we feel that the country is at an inflection point, we actually want to strengthen our social safety nets. We have a discussion coming up about MediShield Life. Then it's all the more so that we have political consensus around these things rather than polarisation.

So at a time when we want more pluralism, we're also at a time when we need policies with clear direction and a firm stance to be taken. If we have a national insurance health-care scheme, who's going to pay, how do we divvy up, who's going to benefit?

- Dr Gillian Koh, senior research fellow, Institute of Policy Studies