

Public expectations for by-election 'tough to ignore'

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The last time a by-election took place in a PAP-held single-member constituency (SMC) was in 1981, after Mr Devan Nair resigned as Member of Parliament for Anson to become President.

The People's Action Party lost that by-election to Mr J.B. Jeyaretnam of the Workers' Party (WP).

With Mr Michael Palmer's resignation yesterday, the seat for Punggol East SMC is now vacant.

The ward of about 33,000 voters was carved out of Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC just before the General Election in May last year. It saw a three-cornered fight which Mr Palmer won with 54.5 per cent of votes. Ms Lee Li Lian of the WP won 41 per cent of votes, and Mr Desmond Lim of the Singapore Democratic Alliance won 4.5 per cent.

Opposition parties now want a by-election in the ward, but Nominated MP Eugene Tan said Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong might not see a need to call one.

Mr Tan noted that unlike opposition stronghold Hougang, Punggol East is a PAP constituency, and the party has appointed a caretaker MP for its residents. Minister of State for Trade and Industry Teo Ser Luck, an MP for neighbouring Pasir-Ris Punggol GRC, has been tasked to oversee Mr Palmer's ward.

When Dr Ong Chit Chung (Jurong GRC) and senior minister of state Tay Eng Soon (Eunos GRC) died in 2008 and 1993 respectively, their seats were also left vacant until the next general election.

Mr Tan, a law professor, added that the PM now has the High Court's confirmation that he has discretion to decide whether and when to call by-elections. That came in August, when the High Court dismissed a Hougang resident's bid for a court declaration that the PM did not have unfettered discretion in this area.

But Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh pointed to public expectations that would be hard to ignore after the Hougang by-election in May. It was called to fill the seat left vacant by Workers' Party MP Yaw Shin Leong, who was expelled in February amid allegations of an extramarital affair. Dr Koh said: "I think from the (Yaw) events, people may feel that a complete resolution to such a situation is have a by-election." It might thus be difficult to avoid a by-election in Punggol East.

Lawyer and former Nominated MP Chandra Mohan Nair also felt it was prudent that a by-election be called. "It is preferable that every constituency has an MP."