

## **The year of action and reflection**

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Changing expectations prompted a rethink of several long-held policies this year, and saw the Government make some course corrections as part of its effort to engage citizens more. Leonard Lim gives a rundown of the key moves.

### ***STAY ENGAGED, BUT TAKE THE LEAD***

#### ***What It Is***

Engagement became the new buzzword of the PAP after last year's general election, when some voters voiced their displeasure that the Government was not listening enough to their concerns.

The ongoing national conversation epitomises its effort to hear what concerns the common man.

But with so much consulting going on, some observers fear a shift from the decisive leadership that has been a hallmark of local politics since independence, to a more populist approach that may hamper policymaking.

It appears not to have been lost on Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. At a PAP party seminar last month, he sought to refocus activists' minds on the issue, and made it clear they must lead, not just execute public opinion.

He said they should not just be jotting down notes at dialogues.

Rather, they should be more engaged, leading the discussion and persuading citizens to see things more in the same way the PAP sees them.

#### ***Looking Ahead***

The PAP will need to strike a balance between listening and leading, as the national conversation enters its second phase, with more concrete themes to be fleshed out soon. This will require both sensitivity and keen minds grounded in the PAP's reasoning for its policies.

Singaporeans today are more wont to speak up, and less inclined to be shepherded into going along with the Government's views.

So, observers say PAP activists need to display patience in listening to opposing ideas and yet be able to explain clearly the Government's rationale - and handle tough questions - on policies related to hot-button topics like foreign labour.

## ***Soundbite***

"We are not just asking people, what are your views, and I will go and I will be your note taker and speak on your behalf... We have ideals, we have ideas, we have policies, we have proposals. And it is our responsibility to lead that discussion together with the people in order to persuade people to see things more in the way we do." – PM Lee

## ***CHAT ON SINGAPORE OF THE FUTURE***

### ***What It Is***

When Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong wanted Singaporeans to ask themselves fundamental questions about what kind of nation they wanted in the future, he decided to get them talking about it.

The result: A "national conversation" that aims to engage thousands of citizens in dialogues and polls, to take a fresh look at policies and national values.

Fittingly, the consultation exercise is being run by a committee of younger ministers, led by Education Minister Heng Swee Keat.

For some, Our Singapore Conversation - as it is called - was welcomed as a chance for ordinary citizens to air their views.

But the move also drew its share of critics, with some raising memories of past consultation exercises - such as Singapore 21 and Remaking Singapore - which detractors say did not result in significant changes.

It has not stopped the latest effort from progressing, though. Some 10,000 Singaporeans have taken part in face-to-face and online dialogues, and another 4,000 are being polled.

So far, several key concerns have emerged: the stress that the education system puts on students; the need for values such as kindness, graciousness and compassion; and national identity.

### ***Looking Ahead***

The conversation started off open-ended - with participants airing what they wanted to see in the future - but will shift to a more focused phase in February.

Discussions will then be held on more specific topics under the themes "Hope", which will look at creating opportunities to fulfil aspirations; "Heart", which will look at how the vulnerable can get better care; and "Home", which will cover values, national identity and culture.

Mr Heng has said the national conversation could finish off with a set of directions for the country and broad measures it should take to get there, rather than a set of policy changes. But he also stressed that specific ideas and changes can also be carried out sooner where needed.

## **PUNGGOL EAST BY-ELECTION?**

### ***What It Is***

Singapore held its first by-election in 20 years in May, after the Hougang seat became vacant when the Workers' Party expelled MP Yaw Shin Leong for refusing to answer allegations of adultery.

The Prime Minister is not bound by law to call a by-election and the last one was in 1992. It was held in Marine Parade, to induct current Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean into politics.

The Hougang poll also marked the first time since independence that a by-election was held in an opposition ward.

The WP candidate was Mr Png Eng Huat, virtually unknown but backed by party boss Low Thia Khiang, who was also a long-time MP of Hougang.

Mr Png won 62.1 per cent of the valid vote against PAP candidate Desmond Choo's 37.9 per cent.

This was lower than Mr Yaw's 64.8 per cent in the 2011 polls.

Following this month's shock resignation of Speaker of Parliament and Punggol East MP Michael Palmer over his extra-marital affair, will the new year bring another by-election?

### ***Looking Ahead***

Political watchers predict that public expectation of a by-election will be hard to ignore, after Hougang voters were given a choice in who would be their next MP.

Last Friday, PM Lee acknowledged these expectations, but he told Singapore reporters at a summit in New Delhi that he was still mulling over whether to hold a by-election, and if so, when.

If polls are called, it will be the first in a PAP-held single-seat since 1981, when the PAP lost Anson to the late J. B. Jeyaretnam of the WP in a shock result.

Most pundits predict a date in March or April, after the lengthy annual Budget debate.

### ***Soundbite***

"From the (Yaw) events, people may feel that a complete resolution to such a situation is to have a by-election." – Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh on the Punggol East situation

## **CUTTING OF MINISTERIAL AND OFFICE-HOLDER PAY YEAR**

### ***What It Is***

It was once a sacred cow many thought would never be slayed. The highest echelon of the People's Action Party had for decades defended its position that sufficiently high pay is needed to draw top talent to public service.

But at the start of the year, in what would be the first of several other recalibrations, the ruling party accepted the recommendations of a committee to cut the salaries of ministers and other political office-holders by up to 51 per cent.

The President's annual salary has since been trimmed by just over half to \$1.54 million, the Prime Minister's by 36 per cent to \$2.2 million, and that of entry-level ministers by 37 per cent to \$1.1 million. With the changes, a Cabinet minister at the bottom of the entry grade for ministers, known as MR4, may get an annual remuneration package of \$935,000, which includes bonuses.

The committee, headed by retired accountant Gerard Ee, kept three principles in mind in its review: competitive salaries to attract people of good calibre; the ethos of public service which entails sacrifice; and a clean wage with no hidden perks.

### ***Looking Ahead***

An idea of just how much entry-grade ministers will earn will be known early next year, when the salaries of the top 1,000 income earners - to which their pay is pegged - are made public.

### ***Soundbite***

"While money should never be the motivation for anyone becoming a politician, the financial sacrifice should not be so large that it discourages outstanding and committed Singaporeans from devoting the best part of their lives to political office." – From the report by the ministerial pay review committee

## **TIME TO GET USED TO SLOWER GROWTH RATE**

### ***What It Is***

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong sprung a surprise for some this month when he said the Government was aiming for a long-term "sustainable" rate of economic growth of 2 per cent to 3 per cent.

Until then, the official target was 3 per cent to 5 per cent.

The change follows the tightening of the foreign labour inflow.

Economic growth has always been central to the PAP's fundamental goals.

In recent times, however, there has been debate on whether Singapore has pursued growth headlong at the expense of leaving behind the lower-income group.

But Mr Lee has defended the pursuit of growth, saying a long period of low or no growth has consequences. For instance, low-wage workers will be hardest hit with near-stagnant pay, and the young will leave Singapore because their aspirations are unfulfilled.

### ***Looking Ahead***

With annual growth at 7 per cent to 8 per cent just a few years ago, Singaporeans will have to get used to the inevitable result of slower growth: fewer jobs created and slower rise in income.

The Government predicts a growth range of 1 per cent to 3 per cent next year, not much better than the 1.5 per cent it expects for this year.

With income inequality on the rise, the notion of "inclusive growth" will also be increasingly at the forefront of discussions on economic strategy.

How the Government will keep Singapore on the growth track and ensure that no one is left behind will be unveiled in February when Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam delivers the Budget.

### ***Soundbite***

"Do we need growth? Yes, we do, because we want to generate resources, we want to improve lives and build a liveable city." – PM Lee