

## What next for the NMP scheme?

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*In the light of Singapore's evolving political landscape, with more contestation, and greater opposition representation in Parliament, the NMP scheme may no longer serve the same purpose.*

To some, they have been a power for the good - non-partisan experts in their field who have contributed to better policymaking. To others, they seem glorified lobbyists working a system that enables them to have a say in the halls of power without being democratically elected.

They are Nominated Members of Parliament (NMPs).

Love them or loathe them, these special MPs, who first came to Parliament in a scheme launched in 1990, have made their mark in many ways.

In contrast to elected MPs, they get around \$2,000 a month to help defray administrative costs, and without that buttress of financial support, a key driver is a passion to further a view that might help make Singapore a better place.

Witness law don Walter Woon, who set the bar high for his nominated chamber mates by getting a Private Member's Bill to become public law: the Maintenance of Parents Act, passed in 1995.

But it has been over two decades since NMPs emerged on the political scene, amid just a tiny number of opposition members in Parliament, and a ruling People's Action Party seemingly invulnerable and desiring outlets for alternative views to be debated in the House.

Since their introduction, there have been a total of 65 NMPs. And their existence became permanently enshrined in 2009 when the Constitution was amended to remove a clause requiring every new Parliament to decide if it wanted to share the House with non-elected members.

But that was an NMP-heyday of sorts - then came the 2011 General Election and, suddenly, there were more opposition members in Parliament.

Three years on, some political watchers also point out that the opposition is also emerging as a more viable outlet for those with views contrary to those of the ruling party.

Amid this change came figures on Wednesday, showing a drop in the number of people applying to be in the next batch of NMPs. Only 36 put their hats in the ring for the nine positions, a big drop, percentage-wise, from 50 in 2011, and 46 in 2009.

With the evolving political landscape, some might wonder: Have NMPs outlived their usefulness?

## **An anomaly**

When the idea of NMPs was first mooted in 1989, then First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said that it would offer Singaporeans more opportunities for political participation and satisfy their desire for alternative voices in Parliament.

Opposition MPs, and even some PAP backbenchers, were up in arms. To them, it was an anomaly that eroded the Westminster-style parliamentary democracy in Singapore.

The unorthodox scheme gave NMPs a free ride into the august chambers of Parliament, allowing them to have a mandate without accountability, they charged.

But while NMPs would be allowed to sit alongside their elected colleagues to weigh in on state matters, they were never meant to be equals. They would have fewer powers, and would not get to vote on constitutional amendments, supply Bills, money Bills, a motion to remove the President, or a motion of no confidence.

The scheme was introduced and, over the years, has become an accepted part of the political system.

Tweaks were made along the way - for example, provision was made for more NMPs in each term, and terms were extended from a maximum of two years to at least 2 1/2 years, with the option of seeking a second term.

This has given NMPs more time to find their feet.

Increasingly, many of the scheme's critics have come around to the view that the institution has made a difference.

Take the current batch of NMPs. Some among them have already made history by being the first NMPs to not just speak against government initiatives, but to vote against them, too.

Three - Ms Faizah Jamal, Ms Janice Koh and Mr Laurence Lien - voted against last year's White Paper on Population, which projected a scenario of Singapore's population reaching 6.9 million in 2030. There were also some who voted against the Public Order (Additional Temporary Measures) Bill passed this year to give police calibrated powers in Little India following last December's riot.

Given their small numbers - NMPs comprise nine out of 99 MPs in total in this Parliament - this did not change the outcome. But nonetheless, they reflected the views of a segment of the population which disagreed with the Government's stance, and provided some degree of checks and balances.

## **Making a difference**

Political watchers say that NMPs have definitely raised the bar of parliamentary debates. Many contribute regularly during question time, raising issues as varied as the conservation of green spaces, family violence and the Central Provident Fund minimum sum.

By the judgement of National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser, NMPs have definitely brought into Parliament "a broader representation of views and voices".

Some, such as Professor Woon, and more recently constitutional expert Thio Li-ann, have also brought their expertise to bear, analysing government Bills and also proposing alternatives.

In 2008, along with fellow NMP Loo Choon Yong, Prof Thio had filed a motion to make a by-election compulsory when the minority member, or half or more members, of a group representative constituency vacate their terms midway.

While the majority voted against it, the duo earned a pat on the back from Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong for elevating the quality of debate in the House.

Others, such as Ms Janice Koh who represents the arts community, have helped to further the interests of the groups under which they came into Parliament.

The founder and artistic director of The Necessary Stage theatre company, Mr Alvin Tan, says Ms Koh has done much to champion the causes of the community. "She's an actress herself and very close to the ground - everything she says is relevant and not from the ivory tower. She's a bridge between the community and Parliament."

Institute of Policy Studies senior researcher Gillian Koh reckons NMPs have also been the voice for controversial issues that political parties may not want to wade into, or narrow issues they deem not worth their effort. With no need to worry about winning or losing votes, NMPs are more likely to bring up such issues in Parliament, she says.

"There may be issues that might not be taken up by members of political parties represented in Parliament because there is no natural local, or large enough political, constituency to which the issue appeals to, or it is too controversial and strays into the 'culture wars'," she says.

The citizen's petition to repeal 377A of the Penal Code, which NMP Siew Kum Hong presented in Parliament in 2007, is an example.

Gay activists initiated the petition on the grounds that the law, which criminalises sex between men, discriminates against homosexuals.

Mr Siew, a lawyer, agreed to submit the petition as he felt a responsibility to give the House a chance to consider it.

Dr Koh also credits NMPs with helping to develop civil society, by pushing for change in the rules on assembly, and political expression online and in the real world.

It takes a thick skin, though, to bring up things that may not be mainstream concerns, says former NMP Zulkifli Baharudin.

The political watcher remembers being "ridiculed" by parliamentarians and the public when he talked about starting a "free-speech corner" like the one in London's Hyde Park.

"They said only crazy people will spend the weekend talking like that," he says. "But it's important to speak about a wide range of issues if you want to be an effective NMP, and not just focus on pet topics."

Over the years, the scheme has also succeeded in bringing in those with good ideas, but who had no interest in joining politics. Among them were academic Lee Tsao Yuan, who sparked a memorable debate about the "Singapore Dream" of owning property, and orthopaedic surgeon Kanwaljit Soin, whose proposals for a law against family violence were incorporated into the Women's Charter.

Through the NMP scheme, more women also entered Parliament. More than a third of NMPs have been women, a much higher proportion than among elected MPs.

There were, of course, NMPs who made little impact. Among some of the NMPs remembered for hardly speaking up are swimmer Joscelin Yeo and unionist Terry Lee.

### **Not all is rosy**

While the scheme has had many successes, on the flip side questions have been raised about the selection process.

Although the rules clearly state that NMPs should be non-partisan, at least three NMPs have been linked to the PAP.

Banker Tan Su Shan, who was a PAP member, quit the party in 2011 to become an NMP to, as she put it, "provide a non-partisan voice" in Parliament.

Entrepreneur Calvin Cheng, whose membership in Young PAP was revealed after he was announced as an NMP in 2009, also quit the party.

Before them, there was former National Kidney Foundation chairman Gerard Ee. After becoming an NMP in 1997, the PAP member remained in the party. His explanation: he would not be subject to the party Whip in Parliament as an NMP.

Mr Lien, the chief executive of National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre, calls for more transparency.

Since NMPs are not elected, he says, getting MPs to select them is "the next best arrangement". But the names of all those nominated should be publicised, and the parliamentary selection committee should also indicate why they chose the successful candidates.

The scheme's most vocal critic, former PAP MP Tan Cheng Bock, goes further. In a recent Facebook salvo against the NMP scheme, he said the committee, now made up of PAP and opposition MPs, "should have been an independent body of Singaporeans with Singapore's interest at heart".

Another issue: With more NMPs being put forward under industry panels these days, rather than applying as independents, some have also cautioned that the scheme could become a platform for lobbying.

Indeed, Dr Tan wrote: "When you invite one group and not some others to be represented in Parliament, you raise more questions than answers - why are some not included?"

He questioned the need for a trade union NMP when there were "already so many elected labour MPs".

Other groups - such as clan associations, new citizens and people of different sexual orientation - all want their voices heard in Parliament, too, and would naturally be "unhappy" that they do not come under the scheme, he said.

Cynics also lament that it is hardly likely that NMPs would rock the boat.

The argument is that since they are not sufficiently motivated to join a party and fight for what they believe in, it is questionable if they would push hard for a change in society that they believe in, even if they had any mandate to do so.

Many who are proposed by establishment types are products of the system that has helped them attain the "excellence in their field", listed as one of the selection criteria.

Giving his take on this, NMP hopeful Ben Tan, a former national sailor and head of sports medicine at Changi Sports Medicine Centre, readily admits that he is a "beneficiary of the strong foundations laid by Singapore's past and present leaders". But it is precisely because of that that he has agreed to being nominated for the post, to give back to society.

### **The future**

With significantly more opposition and hence diversity in Parliament, the political climate in Singapore post-2011 is very different from the days when the NMP scheme started.

Says NUS sociologist and former NMP Paulin Straughan: "Today, one has to seriously consider whether the NMP scheme is going to be relevant. I felt as an NMP that the scheme was a transitory kind of measure." Not only has the number of opposition members in the House gone up, but opposition parties have also taken a less confrontational tack.

The Workers' Party, now the main opposition player in Parliament, has often professed that it would not oppose for the sake of opposing, unlike the firebrand opposition politics of the past.

In that case, some say, they may well have made moot one of the original intentions of the NMP scheme, which was to "evolve a more consensual style of government where alternative views are heard and constructive dissent accommodated".

With stiffer competition for the heart of voters, opposition and PAP MPs have also become more vocal, and are championing more diverse causes.

Mr Zulkifli sees this as one of the reasons for the fewer NMP applicants this year. The MPs from political parties now "have an interest in everything", he notes.

"Increasingly people will expect NMPs to provide political and intellectual leadership. They must be able to contribute towards a broader range of discussions about Singapore, and not just focus on sectoral interests. If they don't, there may be less support for the scheme," he says.

With more contestation, every seat in Parliament has also become more valuable.

Says Prof Straughan: "Members of Parliament give their everything and fight their way to get a seat. In Parliament they have to perform or that will be their last term there. For NMPs it's

more ambiguous and I struggled with this when I was an NMP. At times I wasn't sure why I deserved a place in the House," she says.

Others, like Dr Koh, feel that NMPs may yet have a role to play as seats are more hotly contested, and debates in the House among elected MPs get more vigorous.

"I wonder if NMPs are going to choose to be the moderating influence - that they seek or promote policy and legislative positions that are wise, that bridge what might be otherwise polarised positions," she says. By her reckoning, fluctuations in the numbers of applicants are to be expected.

Some might have held off applying this time around since the Prime Minister has made known that this term of Parliament will be short and will run for only about 2 1/2 years or so, she suggests. Or it might be that fewer are "trying their luck", she adds.

NUS' Prof Tan feels it will be useful to keep the scheme - as long as it does not become a substitute for electoral contests. Otherwise, "it becomes unnecessary once all interests can be represented and thereby seriously considered in policymaking".

For a decidedly emphatic view on where NMPs are heading, there is this from NMP Eugene Tan: Irrelevancy.

Prof Tan, who nevertheless is seeking a second term when his ends in August, thinks NMPs can still contribute now, but the scheme will end when Singapore has either a two-party parliamentary democracy or a multi-party parliamentary democracy.

Indeed, the Singapore Management University law professor says: "It's not a question of whether, but rather when."