

What price, the pioneer vote?

Robin Chan

The Straits Times, 15 February 2014

In 1994, then Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew controversially suggested giving two votes to each married Singaporean aged between 35 and 60 with a child. This was to guard against an increase in the elderly vote in about 20 years' time when the population would start to age.

He said then: "You get hold of all the senior citizens' corners, in no time, you've got 20 per cent, 25 per cent of the vote! And free medical health, free this, free that."

What significance does that hold today?

When Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced that 450,000 seniors would benefit from the Pioneer Generation Package, he also shone the spotlight on that very same voting block the elder Mr Lee had worried about.

Seniors aged 65 and above made up 20 per cent, or a fifth, of the 2.21 million registered voters in the 2011 General Election. So the timing of this package, coming after a watershed general election in May 2011 when the Government's share of the vote fell and two successive by-election defeats, has led some to point out that while the intention of honouring the pioneers might well be heartfelt, the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) stands to gain considerable electoral mileage from the package in the process.

After the 2011 General Election, an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) survey found a big change in voting preferences among those aged 65 and above.

After the 2006 GE, 46.5 per cent of these seniors were found to be conservative and in favour of the status quo. That fell to 28 per cent in 2011, an 18 percentage point drop. Analysts said then that the finding showed the older vote was getting more unsettled.

That is significant as older voters, who lived through Independence and witnessed Singapore's rapid development from Third World to First World, have traditionally been the PAP voting stronghold. They elected the PAP by a landslide in the 1959 General Election and supported the party in its key struggle against the Barisan Sosialis in the 1963 polls.

So why do some of them seem to be turning away from the PAP now?

A rise in income inequality and higher costs of living, coupled with some seniors' lack of savings and the reality of living longer than many may have planned, has made life in Singapore increasingly hard for them. **IPS senior research fellow Gillian Koh says: "The old-old worry that they don't have enough for their health-care and retirement needs.**

"The new measures have to be substantial enough to ease their worries, boost their sense of security about life ahead, (and) raise their trust that the Government will help them along."

With the growing importance of this silver lobby, it is no surprise that the pioneer generation is now a group the ruling party wants to woo.

Right after GE 2011, PM Lee made it a point to say the PAP must not neglect the elderly, who "deserve to have their voices heard too".

Greater political contestation is also a factor, with the Workers' Party (WP) making a strong pitch for the seniors' vote, most clearly in the Punggol East by-election last year.

WP member and Aljunied GRC MP Chen Show Mao said in a rally speech then: "We should remember that earlier generations of Singaporeans laid the foundation for our economic success. What we enjoy today we owe in large part to them, whether they were factory workers, business people, civil servants or others."

In the nearly three years since GE 2011, of the "strategic shifts" made by the Government, the emphasis on the elderly has been the most noticeable. A comparison in the number of mentions of the word "elderly" in previous Budget speeches is telling. A Straits Times study found that "elderly" was mentioned an average of 10.8 times from 2004 to 2011.

In the two years after? An average of 46 mentions. The odds are high Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam will repeat that next Friday when he shares more details of the Pioneer Generation Package in his Budget speech.

At the PAP's convention last December, the party unveiled a senior citizens' advocacy group – the PAP.SG. This finally gave seniors representation on a par with the Women's Wing that was set up in 1989 and the Youth Wing in 1986. One of its speakers, Women's Wing member Chan Hui Min, spoke of "The Political Clout of the Silver Generation in an Ageing Population".

And the Government is putting its money where its mouth is. It has pledged to double annual health-care expenditure to \$8 billion, and will introduce MediShield Life, a universal medical insurance plan that will cover everyone for life. The Pioneer Generation Package, to be announced next Friday, is a further commitment of a sizeable sum of money each year for the next 20 to 30 years.

Crafting policy to meet the needs and assuage the worries of elderly voters is therefore a wise political move. But might there also be a price to pay in terms of raised expectations? **Dr Koh said the messaging and presentation of the package has to ensure younger seniors under 65 accept why they stand on the other side of this hard line, and highlight how there are other policies they benefit from, outside of this package.**

That is something to watch out for, as the number of those aged 65 and above will triple to 900,000 by 2030.

Will those left out of the Pioneer Generation Package also clamour for concessions? The Government has made it clear that this is a special package for a special generation. The challenge is to ensure that the package strengthens trust and the compact between different generations of Singaporeans, rather than undermines it.