

Why now and who does it benefit?

Robin Chan

The Straits Times, 12 January 2013

With several crucial national issues yet to be discussed, the Prime Minister's decision to call a by-election within six weeks of the seat being vacated took some political analysts by surprise yesterday.

But they said it showed Mr Lee Hsien Loong had very likely taken note, from the Hougang experience last year, that voters preferred an election earlier rather than later.

Also, it demonstrated that he wanted to deal with it swiftly and turn his attention in the coming months to the urgent national issues that await direction.

Said Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh: "The PAP is the incumbent (at Punggol East), and the by-election was really precipitated by the standing down of a People's Action Party MP, so calling one now is to show how resolute they are in wanting to deal with the issue.

"It is good that they called it sooner than later."

The PM can call a by-election at his discretion, and Hougang residents waited three months for it.

As in previous polls, Mr Lee gave no clue of his plans, apart from saying he was thinking about it seriously.

But yesterday he explained his unexpected move.

Pointing to a "busy national agenda" that included seeking a consensus on the key population issue and the ongoing national conversation, he said the by-election would give Punggol East residents their own MP in Parliament, "before we focus back on these national issues."

But these issues were what led many, including former Nominated MP Siew Kum Hong, to expect a later by-election, "after we got through the serious issues."

"PM has now decided to do it the other way round," he added.

But the PM's decision was also seen by some analysts as a tactical move in response to the strong opposition interest in the ward.

Besides the Workers' Party which contested it in the 2011 General Election, four others are eyeing the constituency with about 33,000 voters.

Said opposition veteran Wong Wee Nam: "The longer you wait, the longer you are giving the opposition the opportunity to gain a foothold and build up their presence there."