

Why West Coast GRC?

Jeremy Au Yong & Kor Kian Beng
The Straits Times, 8 May 2010

Political observers were scratching their heads yesterday when news broke that Potong Pasir MP Chiam See Tong would be willing to contest the next general election in West Coast GRC with Reform Party chief Kenneth Jeyaretnam.

It is not the choice of teammate that baffles them. It is the choice of location.

Said political observer Eugene Tan, a law lecturer at the Singapore Management University: 'There doesn't seem to be any obvious reason for them to go there, unless they are aware of some local issues which they think would give them a good platform.'

The observers also noted that Mr Chiam, in the past year, had been talking about contesting in Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC.

He is well known in the GRC, which borders his Potong Pasir ward, and his party is keen to take on Deputy Prime Minister and Home Affairs Minister Wong Kan Seng on issues like the influx of foreigners.

Mr Jeyaretnam also declined to explain why he is targeting the five-person constituency, which was uncontested in the 2006 and 2001 elections. He said he would comment only after the electoral boundaries report had been issued.

Yesterday, *The Straits Times* reported that having Mr Chiam and Mr Jeyaretnam jointly contest the West Coast GRC was one of 11 demands made by the Reform Party in its application to join the Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA).

Mr Chiam, who chairs the SDA, is said to have agreed to most of the conditions. But members of both SDA and the Reform Party would also have to give their approval before any merger can proceed.

The Reform Party's demand identifies four likely members of the team for the five-MP West Coast GRC. They are: Mr Chiam and the Reform Party's A team: Mr Jeyaretnam, Mr Tony Tan and Ms Hazel Poa.

Mr Tan and Ms Poa, both 40 and married to each other, were government scholarship holders who now run a chain of tuition centres.

However, should Mr Jeyaretnam's party decide against contesting in West Coast GRC, Mr Chiam has agreed to team up with them in another GRC.

The West Coast GRC is led by Trade and Industry Minister Lim Hng Kiang of the People's Action Party (PAP). It was last contested in the 1997 polls, when the PAP trounced the Workers' Party team, winning 70 per cent of the vote.

The other PAP MPs there are Senior Minister of State (Education as well as Trade and Industry) S. Iswaran, Mr Arthur Fong, Mr Cedric Foo and Madam Ho Geok Choo.

Dr Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies thinks the lack of opposition interest in West Coast GRC might have prompted the choice.

She said: 'The new players would be careful not to split the vote among the opposition. As such, they may want to pick some virgin territory with regard to opposition activities.'

But would it not be a waste to move Mr Chiam out of his base?

SMU's Mr Tan agrees, but wonders if the condition to move him there might be a power play by the Reform Party.

'I think the message from Reform to Mr Chiam's party is that 'you need us more than we need you'. So this could be a show of strength and confidence,' he said.

When contacted yesterday, Madam Ho said her fellow PAP MPs would welcome a contest.

'We continue to see many residents coming to our meet-the-people sessions. It shows they know they are being helped, and we feel we have served them well.'