

How effective were the NMPs?

Ong Dai Lin

Today, 9 November 2011

Despite having their term disrupted by the General Election and the Presidential Election, the outgoing batch of Nominated Members of Parliament (NMPs) collectively gave a good account of themselves - going by the number of times they rose to speak in the House.

A check on Hansard - or the Parliament records - showed that this batch of NMPs spoke a total of 247 times, which works out to an average of about 27 times each. This is comparable to their predecessors if compared over the same duration of their terms in Parliament.

The count comprises speeches made and questions raised in Parliament, excluding supplementary questions.

Among the outgoing batch of NMPs, sociologist Paulin Straughan spoke 75 times – the highest among her peers. At the other end of the spectrum, former national swimmer Joscelin Yeo spoke just seven times.

Noting that the quality is as important as the quantity of Parliamentary speeches and questions, Professor Straughan told Today: "As NMPs, our only job is to attend Parliament.

That's why I made sure I debate on every Bill. If that was all we could do - because we don't have constituents - it is important that we treat all Parliament sessions with respect and actively contribute."

Ms Yeo did not respond to Today's queries on whether an NMP's effectiveness should be judged on the number times he or she speaks in Parliament.

Unionist Terry Lee, who spoke 10 times in Parliament, said: "Different people would have their own different focus, thinking ... and they specialise in different sectors." While acknowledging that he was not prolific in making speeches, Mr Lee noted that he was one of the first to ask about the Integrated Resorts and their possible problems, as well as propose initiatives such as mobile clinics because of the aging population.

Ways to gauge an NMP's Impact

An NMP receives an allowance of about S\$2,000 a month. And political analysts Today spoke to concurred that the number of times an NMP speaks in Parliament is one way to gauge his or her effectiveness. However, there are other indicators, they noted.

Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan said: "The number of speeches would indicate how active they were in Parliament. Because for NMPs, that's their only platform, unlike MPs who people will get to know through the work they do."

But Assistant Professor Tan added: "The other indicator is the impact they made, which is harder to gauge."

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh said: "Rather than numbers, it would be more valuable to look at quality of the points made and concerns on the ground, and whether intervention resulted in an airing of these issues in parliament".

She cited how The Substation artistic co-director Audrey Wong had raised the issue of facilities and resources for the arts, and censorship.

National University of Singapore political science lecturer Reuben Wong suggested that the impact of NMPs can be judged by the number of ministerial replies to them in Parliament and the number of letters to newspapers referencing their speeches.

Dr Wong mentioned Mr Viswa Sadasivan's tabling of a motion in Parliament to reaffirm its commitment to the nation-building tenets of the National Pledge when debating national policies, which drew a spirited response from former Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew.

Asst Prof Tan also cited Mr Viswa as an NMP who left an impression on him.

Former NMP Zulkifli Baharudin noted that the impact of a NMP also depends on whether "the issue of the day" coincided with an NMP's pet topics.

Dr Wong noted that there were several debates on "more contentious" issues – including whether Section 377A of the Penal Code should be repealed - between 2006 and 2009.

In comparison, in the last two to three years, the biggest issue was the global economic situation, said Dr Wong.