

No let-up expected as Parliament readies itself for second half

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TODAY, 10 May 2014

When the 12th Parliament kicked off in October 2011 after what many had described as a “watershed” General Election (GE), robust opening speeches by Members of Parliament (MPs) were the order of the day and they hinted at what was to come.

Yet, few — not even the most hard-nosed political junkies — could have predicted what would have transpired by the time the Parliament session took its mid-term break last month: From spirited debates on ministerial salaries to the Population White Paper, the management of town councils and scandals that forced two MPs — one from each side of the political divide — to vacate their seats, there was nary a dull moment in the House.

When MPs were not kept busy addressing hot-button issues, such as public transport and foreign manpower, they had to deal with unprecedented events such as the Little India riot last December.

With a record number of Opposition MPs and a post-GE 2011 expectation of change, an increasingly demanding public had set a high bar for the 12th Parliament. And, to a large extent, the first half of the session lived up to its billing, political analysts said.

Over the 30 months of the 12th Parliament’s first half, history was made several times, including the election of Madam Halimah Yacob as the Republic’s first woman Speaker, following the resignation of Mr Michael Palmer after his extramarital affair.

Mr Palmer’s resignation as an MP — only months after former Workers’ Party (WP) Hougang MP Yaw Shin Leong had to vacate his seat under similar circumstances — also paved the way for the WP’s Lee Li Lian to become the first woman Opposition MP to helm a single-member ward after she won the subsequent Punggol East by-election.

Despite such historic moments, however, bread-and-butter issues were the ones that dominated parliamentary proceedings, as MPs voiced concerns on, for example, the frequent MRT breakdowns, inflow of foreign workers, rising cost of healthcare, car and housing prices, as well as worries businesses had over increasing costs, among others.

Singapore Management University law lecturer and Nominated MP (NMP) Eugene Tan went as far as describing the first half of the 12th Parliament session as an important indicator of the Republic’s political progress.

“Of course, progress is not success, but the key point is that Parliament, as the central law-making institution and key platform for debate on issues of national importance and concern, has reasserted its relevance and importance,” said Assoc Prof Tan. “This will only grow in the years ahead.”

Did WP make an impact?

Among those TODAY spoke to, opinion was divided over whether having more Opposition members in Parliament added to the diversity of voices.

Dr Gillian Koh, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), felt parliamentary debates have become more lively, with Opposition voices and NMPs “opting to take clearly different tack on policy issues from the Government position”.

Added former NMP and political observer Siew Kum Hong: “There is much more scrutiny on everyone in Parliament, from office holders (and) PAP backbenchers to Opposition MPs — possibly the only exceptions are the NMPs. This increased attention has predictably caused (the PAP and WP MPs) to really raise their game and, by that, I mean that even the PAP backbenchers have been forced to ask more forceful questions.”

However, Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC MP Gan Thiam Poh, a first-term PAP MP, disagreed that the presence of more Opposition MPs had contributed to the robustness of the debates. He said that he had received feedback that PAP backbenchers “sound more like the Opposition, (while) the Opposition sounds more like the PAP”. “Everybody has been speaking out candidly and constructively,” he said.

He added: “Quite often they (the Opposition MPs) also agree with the Government policy. But at times when they don’t agree with the policy, we hope they could provide better alternatives.”

Mr Gan’s comments echoed the views previously expressed by PAP leaders and MPs. For example, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had said the Opposition did not present any strong views or alternatives, while Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen had pointed out that the proposals by the WP in their population policy paper were not new.

Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC MP Hri Kumar Nair also criticised the WP for sitting on the fence on hot-button issues. At a recent round-table discussion organised by The Straits Times, he repeated the criticism and argued that, for example, the WP had not taken a stand on lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transsexuals.

Rejecting the criticism, WP Chairman Sylvia Lim said her party had made clear its position during the debate on Section 377A of the Penal Code. It had said then that its leadership was divided on the issue and that it would not push for the law to be repealed. She added that she would “leave people to judge whether they feel that we have played a useful role in Parliament”.

Former NMP Viswa Sadasivan, meanwhile, singled out WP chief Low Thia Khiang, Ms Lim and parliamentary rookies Pritam Singh and Gerald Giam for their performance in the House.

However, both he and Mr Siew felt that first-term Aljunied GRC MP Chen Show Mao — whose credentials as a former Rhodes Scholar and high-flying corporate lawyer attracted much hype in the lead-up to the 2011 GE — hardly made an impact.

Mr Chen and WP leaders did not reply to TODAY’s queries for responses to the comments made by analysts.

However, WP MPs this newspaper spoke to reiterated that they are a small minority in the House. The party has seven MPs and two Non-Constituency MPs (NCMPs), compared with the PAP’s 80 MPs.

Still, WP MP for Punggol East, Ms Lee Li Lian, noted that having more WP MPs — in the previous Parliament, the party had only one MP and one NCMP — meant more air-time for their views, and made it possible for the party to cover a wide range of policy areas.

“Despite the increase in numbers, the total number of Opposition MPs and NCMPs remains only 10 of 90 (excluding NMPs) so, while we are making an impact, we are still small in numbers,” she said.

NCMP Yee Jenn Jong reiterated that the PAP still holds “92 per cent of elected seats — a very lopsided representation”.

Apart from taking part in Parliamentary debates, WP MPs tabled two adjournment motions, although one was subsequently withdrawn. Ms Lim filed an adjournment motion on town-council management, but later withdrew it after the Prime Minister called for a review of the nature of town councils. Mr Yee filed an adjournment motion to revamp the childcare sector.

NMP Eugene Tan felt the WP was pacing itself and could shift into higher gear in the second half of the parliamentary session. “I don’t think the (first half of the parliamentary term) is a good gauge of the WP MPs’ performance, or even that of the PAP,” he said.

“Using the (first half) as a guide, we can expect the (second half) to be more engaging and impactful.”

A baptism of fire for first-term MPs

Excluding the NCMPs and NMPs, almost 30 per cent of the 87 MPs in the legislature are rookies. Of the 80 PAP MPs, 23 are first-term, while five of the seven WP MPs were cutting their teeth in Parliament for the first time.

Ms Lee found herself thrust into the deep end immediately after winning the by-election on Jan 26 last year.

Nine days later, Parliament embarked on one of its most intense debates — on the Population White Paper — followed by the Budget debate in less than three weeks.

“The most memorable (part) was having to prepare for my maiden Parliament speech during the debate on the Population White Paper, followed by the Budget debate shortly after I was sworn in,” she recalled.

“The White Paper was released almost immediately after the Punggol East by-election, so it was really a baptism of fire!” Overall, Ms Lee described her term as “fulfilling and a good learning experience”.

Similarly, the first-term PAP MPs whom TODAY spoke to cited the preparation for their maiden speeches as an experience etched in their memory. The debate on the Population White Paper was also particularly memorable, they said.

Said Tanjong Pagar GRC MP Chia Shi-Lu, who works as a consultant at the Singapore General Hospital: “I have given many talks and speeches in my career, but to give one at the opening of Parliament is something that is hard to prepare for.”

He added that he had learnt a lot from the debates, including how Cabinet members craft and deliver their replies to questions tabled by MPs.

“It looks easy at first, but when one considers how well one has to grasp the breadth of policy considerations and issues, and be able to communicate them to answer specific questions, one better appreciates the capabilities of our ministers and office holders,” said Dr Chia.

The first-term PAP MPs have left their mark. Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC MP Janil Puthucheary, for example, proposed free travel on public transport before peak hours to change travel patterns and alleviate congestion woes, a suggestion that became reality after the Government rolled out a free pre-peak travel trial, which yesterday extended for a second year.

Political analysts did not want to single out the performance of any first-term PAP MPs. But, it was “refreshing to see so many PAP MPs joining the Opposition MPs to call for greater attention to the needs of the less fortunate in society, as well as those with special needs” during the debate on the President’s address at the opening of the 12th Parliament, said Mr Viswa. “The change we are seeing in Parliament, especially with regard to PAP MPs, is positive and should be acknowledged,” he added.

Several PAP first-termers said they were gratified to have made a difference by contributing to policy changes and enhancements.

Nee Soon GRC MP Patrick Tay, who is from the labour movement, had been lobbying for changes to the Employment Act to cover more workers. The amendments were passed last year.

He also cited the enactment of the Protection from Harassment Act in March this year. “I raised the plight of public healthcare workers and issues of harassment as early as 2012, as well as their challenges at their workplace,” he said. He added: “These changes have brought me renewed faith that we can push and advocate for what is best and right, and things will and can change for the better.”

Dr Chia said he also savoured the “small victories”, citing his successful call for the removal of the administrative fee to use Medisave under certain situations in the outpatient setting.

Dr Chia, who focused mainly on healthcare and elderly issues, which are close to his heart, noted that many of the points that he had brought up were acted upon, such as increasing subsidies for the Pioneer Generation, and universal healthcare insurance.

Mr Gan, who had spoken on issues such as public transport and foreign manpower, noted that while not all his suggestions were adopted wholesale, they were always taken into consideration. “I can see that things are being done,” he said.

NMPs making a difference?

The Nominated Member of Parliament scheme was introduced in 1990 to provide independent and non-partisan views on a wide range of topics.

Over the years, its relevance has been discussed from time to time. With a record number of Opposition MPs in the House, there are some who feel that the scheme has run its course. Others, however, argue that there is a greater need for non-partisan views in the Parliament amid the current political landscape.

Assoc Prof Tan, who is seeking a second term as NMP, said his experience left him “more persuaded than before that there is a role for NMPs”. “They can provide an additional avenue for non-partisan perspectives and positions without fear or favour,” he said.

On the personal front, Assoc Prof Tan — who teaches the legislative system as part of his constitutional law course — said he had come to better appreciate the role of elected parliamentarians and the vital role of the legislature.

Again, the debate on the Population White Paper was used by analysts as a barometer on performance. While three NMPs — Laurence Lien, Faizah Jamal and Janice Koh — voted “no” when Parliament was asked to endorse the White Paper, Assoc Prof Tan abstained from voting.

The way the NMPs voted left an impression on Mr Siew, who also singled out the performance of Ms Koh and Mr Lien.

He felt Ms Koh had advocated well on arts-related issues, but also spoke on many issues beyond the arts; while Mr Lien had consistently delivered “some of the most thoughtful speeches” in Parliament and staked out “a principled high ground on helping less fortunate Singaporeans”.

Mr Lien said he felt privileged to have had the chance to raise social issues and policies in the House. “While many members have focused on more immediate issues that their constituents face, I have been able to raise deeper and longer-term social concerns,” he said. “I raise these either on behalf of a large segment of the community or because an issue is under-appreciated.”

Like Assoc Prof Tan, Mr Lien believes the NMP scheme should continue. However, he said the time could come when it is no longer needed.

“I think Singapore is not yet a mature democracy. Therefore, the NMP scheme is still useful as it brings people with deep expertise in important areas to provide missing perspectives,” said Mr Lien.

“However, at some stage when our democracy is more mature, I think the NMP scheme would not be necessary.”

In the meantime, Mr Lien suggested that the selection process of NMPs could be made more transparent, including publicising the list of all who applied and the reasons given by the Special Select Committee for selecting the successful candidates.

Overall, IPS’ Dr Koh noted the comprehensive policymaking efforts carried out by the 12th Parliament in the first half of its term.

“There doesn’t seem to be any stone left unturned in terms of socio-economic policy,” she said, citing the slew of reviews and reforms on a wide range of policy areas.

“But, I think there are still public intellectuals who wonder if there can be a completely different governance model altogether, premised on universal access, a high level of social inclusion and state provision of public goods,” she said.

“However this will require, in the same way, a qualitatively different fiscal set-up. The debate on MediShield Life will be an indication of the public’s appetite for such reform.”

With Parliament reconvening on Friday — and with major initiatives including MediShield Life and changes to the scoring system for the Primary School Leaving Examination on the agenda — political junkies and the man in the street will have much to look forward to.