

Should MPs attribute comments to sources?

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Two recent incidents involving Workers' Party MPs have sparked discussions online on how rigorously politicians should attribute materials and arguments from others.

In both cases, the original authors told the MPs — one of whom used the inputs in a parliamentary speech without acknowledgement — not to attribute the materials.

Still, political observers *Today* spoke to had mixed views about the matter: Some felt it was not a big deal, while others pointed out that it was only appropriate to attribute the source.

Last Thursday, Aljunied GRC MP Pritam Singh made a speech calling for an ombudsman here during the Prime Minister's Office Committee of Supply debate.

The fact that Mr Singh's speech was largely identical to a 2008 blog post on the same topic has since caused a buzz among netizens. Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean, too, remarked that he "was struck by how remarkably similar" Mr Singh's speech was to the blog post, when he responded to Mr Singh's suggestion in Parliament.

When contacted, Mr Singh referred this reporter to the same blog where the author had posted on Wednesday: "I note that there has been some discussion about Workers' Party MP Pritam Singh and my post 'Time for an Ombudsman'.

"For the record, Pritam contacted me for permission to use some of my text. I told him to go ahead with my blessings. No acknowledgements were necessary. I am happy he found my thoughts useful. Let's keep our eyes on the bigger picture."

Independent scholar Derek da Cunha told *Today* that "politicians using someone else's ideas is not a new phenomenon".

He cited how then-US presidential candidate Barack Obama had been accused in 2008 of plagiarising a speech made by Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick in 2006, but this later became a non-issue after it was disclosed Mr Obama had been given permission to do so.

Dr da Cunha added: "This case is quite similar to the controversy surrounding Pritam Singh's use of someone else's ideas." Still, he noted, as a general principle, one should seek permission first or at least credit a source when using another's ideas.

Former Nominated MP Siew Kum Hong added: "Generally, I think the appropriate thing to do is to attribute the source, especially if words are used in a verbatim fashion. The fact that consent was granted only goes towards the copyright issues."

He added: "You have to come at it from the position of a listener and whether a listener would, given all the circumstances, think that these words were original to the speaker or someone else. The appropriate thing is to avoid leaving any room for doubt as to whether the words were original to the speaker."

Mr Singh's fellow Aljunied GRC MP, Mr Chen Show Mao, was also criticised by some netizens for a note he posted on his Facebook page which had been written by former civil

servant Donald Low. He posted the note after PAP MP Vikram Nair had challenged his suggestions in Parliament for more social spending.

Mr Chen had prefaced the note with “Many of you wrote to me with your views on the subject of government spending (from which I learned a great deal), including the following”. Mr Low also clarified later that he too had given permission for his post to be reproduced without attribution.

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh added that just as there will be people who bring up such cases, there will be others who will discount them, given that these involved rookie politicians.

But now that some have made clear they would want their parliamentarians to attribute and credit their sources, she felt that MPs would meet those standards.

On Wednesday, Mr Chen reflected on the episode on his Facebook page. He wrote: “I have been thinking about our social norms, most recently the norms for sharing things online.”

He added that in this particular instance, the person who sent him the note “preferred not to be cited by politicians”. Mr Chen said: “So I shared it with you on my FB page with a preface ... Was that a sensible way to share online what others have shared with us? I have my views and have learned much from yours.”