

Speaker of Parliament Palmer resigns over extramarital affair

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In a major recent scandal affecting the People's Action Party, Speaker of Parliament Michael Palmer, 44, yesterday announced his resignation after admitting to party leaders on Saturday that he had an affair with a People's Association employee.

Describing his indiscretion as a "grave mistake", Mr Palmer, who is married and has a 10-year-old son, told reporters at a 15-minute press conference - where he appeared alongside Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean - that he had resigned as a Member of Parliament (MP) and as a member of the People's Action Party (PAP) to "take full responsibility".

The resignation of the MP for Punggol East marked the second time in 10 months that an elected MP was forced to leave his seat because of an extramarital affair. It raises the spectre of another by-election - after Hougang residents went to the polls in May to elect a replacement for former Workers' Party MP Yaw Shin Leong - this time, in Punggol East Single Member Constituency, which was one of the most hotly contested seats in the General Election last year.

Parliament will also need to name a new Speaker - a post that is behind only the President and the Prime Minister - just over a year after Mr Palmer was appointed. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong will nominate a replacement in the Parliament sitting next month. In the meantime, Deputy Speaker and veteran MP Charles Chong will be the Acting Speaker.

Mr Palmer's indiscretion also comes in the wake of a series of recent scandals here involving men in high positions having extramarital affairs.

Apart from Mr Yaw, former Singapore Civil Defence Force chief Peter Lim and ex-Central Narcotics Bureau director Ng Boon Gay have been in the news for the wrong reasons.

In Mr Palmer's case, the woman involved was identified by the PA as Ms Laura Ong, a constituency director with the Pasir Ris West constituency office. Ms Ong, who is believed to be in her 30s, had resigned on Monday, PA said in a statement. Ms Ong could not be reached on her mobile phone.

Her ex-colleagues were also tight-lipped on her whereabouts when TODAY visited her former workplace.

At the press conference, Mr Palmer and Mr Teo apologised to the Punggol East residents. Mr Palmer said: "My conduct was improper and it was a serious error judgement. I have resigned in order to avoid further embarrassment to the PAP and to Parliament ... I am deeply sorry for letting down the residents of Punggol East, the PAP, and everyone who has believed in me and supported me. I apologise unreservedly to them, and to my family."

Mr Teo, who also is the 1st Assistant Secretary-General of the PAP, said: "I am very sorry that we have let the residents of Punggol East down. I assure you that we will put things right and continue to look after you."

Mr Teo said the party first learnt of the matter when Mr Palmer told him about it on Saturday, and offered his resignation. Mr Teo said the Prime Minister was then informed. Both Mr Teo and Mr Lee felt that Mr Palmer's resignation was "the proper thing to do".

Mr Lee also said that the matter be dealt with "decisively, and in an open way", said Mr Teo.

In a Facebook post yesterday, Mr Lee said that it was "with great sadness" that he accepted Mr Palmer's resignation. "But all MPs and grassroots advisers must uphold high standards of propriety and personal conduct, especially when dealing with constituents, activists, and staff," he said.

At the press conference, Mr Teo intervened several times - saying that there was "no need to go into such details" - when journalists tried to ask for more information about the affair and the woman involved, and for instance how Mr Palmer's wife had reacted to the news.

On whether the image of the party will be tarnished by the scandal, Mr Teo said: "We do our best to choose people carefully, and no selection system will be foolproof. Sometimes problems will emerge even many years after an appointment or a selection. But ... the important thing to do is, when such an event does occur, we have to act properly ... to act openly and decisively."

Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan, who is also a Nominated Member of Parliament, said the PAP has taken "a body blow".

"But it is not going to be fatal, partly because they have acted swiftly and resolutely. That will help to cushion the negative repercussions," he added.

Both Assistant Professor Tan and Institute of Policy Studies Senior Research Fellow Gillian Koh noted that the PAP's response is a swifter than how the WP had reacted to the Yaw Shin Leong affair.

Nevertheless, Dr Koh pointed out that the PAP is an established and hugely experienced party, having dealt with such matters before - whether personal failings or financial malfeasance. The WP, however, is "relatively new to the game and responded differently but we must remember, so did Mr Yaw, as the WP leadership had led us to understand at the time".

To ensure that Punggol East residents will continue to be served, Mr Teo Ser Luck, Minister of State (Trade and Industry) and MP of Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC, will take care of the constituency, while another Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC MP, Mr Zainal Sapari, will be appointed as the new Chairman of the Pasir Ris-Punggol Town Council. Mr Zainal is currently the Vice-Chairman of the town council.

Last night, Mr Palmer, his wife, Mr Teo Chee Hean and Mr Teo Ser Luck met 30 key grassroots volunteers at PAP's Punggol East Branch Office.

Mr Palmer apologised to the grassroots activists. His wife "did not say anything and sat supportively beside (her husband)", said Mr Paul Ling, 41, who is Vice-Chairman of Punggol East Citizen's Consultative Committee.

Mr Ling added that Mr Palmer urged the grassroots activists to "continue with the good work and to make residents our first priority".

He said: "(Our) main concern was how we are going to move on. We were quickly assured by DPM Teo and Mr Teo (Ser Luck) that the GRC will be backing us up." According to Mr Ling, the by-election was "far from (the) minds" of the grassroots activists who were "overcome with emotions".

Mr Teo Chee Hean said: "The grassroots leaders were shocked and saddened by the news. They recounted how Michael had helped many residents and touched their lives."

Punggol East residents TODAY spoke to were stunned by the news and expressed gratitude for the work he has done in the constituency. They added that they were open to the possibility of a by-election, in order to elect a replacement for Mr Palmer. "We all liked him a lot, what a pity that he threw it away for a woman," said a shopkeeper who only wished to be known as Mr Er.

On Mr Palmer's decision to resign, another resident said: "It is his personal choice ... if he feels that he cannot face the public or do his job right."