

## **The Big Read: With more heat and dust, first half of Parliament a sign of things to come**

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With Parliament currently on its mid-term break, the 27 months over which the first half of the session had spanned were rather eventful, to say the least.

When the 13th Parliament opened in January 2016, a Workers' Party (WP) member turned her back on the Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) post, forcing a debate on the worth of such members.

Less than two months later, Parliament was rocked by a scandal which saw Mr David Ong resigning as a MP over an extramarital affair with a fellow People's Action Party (PAP) member who has since quit the ruling party.

Singaporeans also witnessed the stepping down of a Parliamentary Speaker to run for President, with the surprising replacement in the form of a Cabinet Minister – only the second time in the Republic's post-independence history that a Minister resigned to take on the post of Speaker.

Along the way, the Constitution was amended to allow a Presidential Election to be reserved for a particular race that has not seen an elected representative for five consecutive terms. In total, more than 100 Bills were written into laws amid an active legislative agenda.

Several ministerial statements were also delivered, with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong himself apologising to Singaporeans before putting himself before the House to address allegations of abuse of power in the Oxley Road saga.

But underneath all the heat and dust generated, political watchers say the first half of the 13th Parliament has thrown up trends that may become more pronounced in the second half, as the run-up to the next General Election (GE) – which has to be held by January 2021 – begins in earnest.

Increasing partisanship is one such trend. While this has resulted in more vigorous debates, it has also at times led to unnecessary politicking, the observers point out.

The other is the emergence of younger leaders from both sides of the House, who have been front and centre in several parliamentary debates.

### **Rigorous debates, a 'more polarised' parliament**

For the first time in about three decades, there are only two political parties – the PAP and the WP – in the House.

Between 1986 and 1988, veteran opposition figure Chiam See Tong, who was then the chief of the Singapore Democratic Party, was the sole opposition member in Parliament, following the expulsion of the late former WP leader J B Jeyaretnam from the House after a criminal conviction.

And with WP currently having nine representatives (six elected MPs and three NCMPs), some political watchers felt that the party has shown an improvement in its overall performance in the House compared to previous parliamentary terms.

“The WP has raised its game in a concerted effort to impress Singaporeans of the need for a credible opposition in the legislature,” said Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan.

Echoing the view, Dr Felix Tan, an associate lecturer at SIM Global Education, said the more vociferous debates have kept “the ruling party on its toes”. He added: “It provides a sense that they are not simply there to oppose the Government for (the sake of opposing), but really to critically examine the issues at hand and to make the government of the day accountable for policies.”

While the WP has been “increasingly assertive” in debates, Nanyang Technological University Assistant Professor Woo Jun Jie nevertheless felt that its performance has not been “entirely consistent”. For example, he noted that the WP MPs appeared to be rather subdued in expressing their stance on fake news.

Former PAP MP Inderjit Singh said the WP MPs have shown that their greater numbers in Parliament have made them more effective. “For example, for the first time, they voted against the Budget, showing they are willing to stand firm on their position,” he added.

Last month, eight members of the WP – excluding former WP chief Low Thia Khiang who was not present in Parliament as he had to attend to family matters – had voted against the Budget statement, the first time this has happened since 1986.

Nevertheless, Mr Singh said the WP has yet to provide compelling alternative policy ideas, which remains the weakness of the Opposition.

As a sign of WP’s increasing assertiveness as well as the polarisation of views in the august chambers, the division bell was rung on several occasions – at the request of the PAP or the WP – in the first half of the 13th Parliament.

These included the Budget debate, as well as the debates on the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore (Amendment) Bill and the Criminal Law (Temporary Provisions) (Amendment) Bill.

Most decisions in Parliament are determined by a majority vote, typically through members voicing “aye” or “no”. This can, however, be challenged by calling for a division that has to be first supported by at least four other members in the House. After a division has been called, every MP will have to vote on the issue and their votes are tabulated electronically. Alternatively, MPs can also have their dissent recorded without calling for a division.

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser noted that a division is called when a consensus is unlikely, and the MPs are required to state their positions clearly and explicitly.

Assoc Prof Eugene Tan said it was not surprising for the opposition party to call for a division for contentious issues.

“For the PAP, it is rare for them to ask for the division bell since they very much dictate the legislative agenda. But it signals the PAP’s intent to hold the WP to a position on certain key issues,” he added.

During the debate on this year’s Budget, a division was called by Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat, after the WP said they had intended to vote to approve the Budget but this should not be mistaken as supporting the Government’s intention to raise the goods and services tax (GST) from 7 to 9 per cent sometime between 2021 and 2025.

But Mr Heng responded by saying that the 2018 Budget statement includes the Government’s plan to raise the GST in the coming years. He then called for a division, and the WP MPs voted against the Budget.

While the observers felt that the general quality of the parliamentary debates has gone up, Dr Felix Tan noted that the Parliament sittings were marred by some rather “petty squabbles over certain expression of opinions”. “Not only was that distracting, it was rather unnecessary,” he added.

Last month, several PAP ministers demanded WP chairman Sylvia Lim withdraw and apologise for her claims that the Government had floated “test balloons” on the need to raise revenues within this term and had intended to raise the GST immediately.

Ms Lim refuse to do either, which prompted Leader of the House Grace Fu to remark that she was “deeply disappointed” with Ms Lim’s “deplorable” conduct, and the “low standards” set by her and the opposition party.

The incident drew criticism from some sections of the public. However, Senior Minister of State (Communications and Information and Health) Chee Hong Tat explained on Facebook that it was important for the PAP Government to call out Ms Lim on her claims and remove any doubt about the intended timing of the goods and services tax (GST) hike, as the issue could later be used for political attacks, including during the next GE.

### **What stood out**

While there were plenty of memorable debates in the first half of the 13th Parliament, several political watchers said the one on 38 Oxley Road stood out above the rest.

The two-day debate last July came after a dispute between the Prime Minister and his two younger siblings over the fate of their family home spilled into the public domain.

At the start of the debate, Mr Lee delivered a ministerial statement to address allegations of abuse of power, among other things, which were levelled against him by his siblings.

During the debate, the party whip was lifted, which allowed MPs to vote freely, instead of adhering to the party line.

**Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director for research at the Institute of Policy Studies, said: “Questions about government processes and even integrity would be explosive any day in Singapore where political legitimacy of both the ruling PAP and opposition parties depend on the idea that actors keep on the straight and narrow.”**

Other closely-watched debates were the discussions on the Elected Presidency scheme, and the impending GST hike during the Budget debate.

The debate on this year's Budget was the longest in five years, with the House discussing the issue for 51 hours and 50 minutes spread over eight days.

Asst Prof Woo noted that these issues were highly unprecedented in nature. "These issues also emphasise the importance of Parliament as a venue for discussing issues of great (importance) to the Singaporean polity," he added.

Assoc Prof Tan Ern Ser reiterated that the robust debates on these issues had a bearing on the integrity of the PAP leadership and the citizens' trust in the Government.

"Trust is a critical political capital for the Government. Once that trust is eroded or lost, the Government would not be able to mobilise the people behind its vision, goals, strategies, and policies, which means that it'd not have the legitimacy and authority to govern effectively," he added.

### **High attendance rate, first-term mps making their mark**

Out of the 88 elected MPs currently in the 13th Parliament, 20 – or about 23 per cent – are first-term MPs. This excludes the three NCMPs from the WP, who are also cutting their teeth in Parliament for the first time.

And the performances of some first-term backbenchers were singled out by the political watchers. These included Mr Louis Ng (Nee Soon GRC) and Ms Joan Pereira (Tanjong Pagar GRC) from the PAP, and WP NCMPs, Associate Professor Daniel Goh and Mr Leon Perera.

Away from the new faces, the observers felt that WP's Aljunied GRC MPs Mr Pritam Singh and Ms Sylvia Lim, as well as some younger PAP office-holders such as Education Minister (Higher Education and Skills) Ong Ye Kung, Mr Chee and Senior Minister of State (Education and Communications and Information) Janil Puthuchery, also made an impression.

Based on Hansard records, the most outspoken backbenchers were Mr Ng, Mr Perera and Dr Lee Bee Wah (Nee Soon GRC). The least vocal were Mr Lee Yi Shyan (East Coast GRC), Mr Teo Ser Luck (Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC) and Mr Edwin Tong (Marine Parade GRC).

Among the Nominated MPs, Ms K Thanalethimi spoke up the most often, while Mr Ganesh Rajaram was at the other end of the spectrum.

In terms of attendances, the first half of the 13th Parliament was generally well-attended, with all MPs – excluding NMPs – attending at least about three quarters of the 71 sittings.

Those with relatively lower attendance were Senior Minister of State (Defence and Foreign Affairs) Maliki Osman, Mr Heng, Foreign Affairs Minister Vivian Balakrishnan, and Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam. Mr Heng was out of action for several months after suffering a stroke in May 2016.

Among the NMPs, Mr Azmoon Ahmad and Assistant Professor Mahdev Mohan had the lowest attendance at about 66 per cent.

Those with full attendance included Ms Thanaletchimi, Mr Louis Ng (Nee Soon GRC), Mr Desmond Choo (Tampines GRC), Dr Tan Wu Meng (Jurong GRC), Mr Christopher de Souza (Holland-Bukit Timah GRC), Ms Denise Phua (Jalan Besar GRC), Mr Sitoh Yih Pin (Potong Pasir), Mr Patrick Tay (West Coast GRC), Mr Melvin Yong (Tanjong Pagar GRC) as well as the three NCMPS – Asst Prof Daniel Goh, Mr Leon Perera and Mr Dennis Tan.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Chan Chun Sing and Parliamentary Secretary (Culture, Community and Youth) Baey Yam Keng were the political officeholders who attended every sitting.

### **Changing of the guard**

Leadership transitions at both the PAP and the WP – which recently elected a new chief, Mr Pritam Singh, to take over from Mr Low – are on the cards, and some observers have noticed the younger leaders coming to the fore.

From posing or fielding parliamentary questions and participating in debates and motions, Assoc Prof Eugene Tan said the new generation of leaders are “making their presence felt even if it's under the watchful eyes of their party elders”.

He added: “We are witnessing a generational change in Singapore's Parliament with both parties undergoing the transition.”

Assoc Prof Tan Ern Ser noted that political officeholders, in particular, have to demonstrate that they have done their homework and hold considered opinions that are defensible, for instance.

For example, the political watchers cited how Mr Heng has been helming the Budget debates since he took over the finance portfolio in October 2015, as well as 4G members of the Select Committee studying deliberate online falsehoods – Minister for Social and Family Development Desmond Lee and Senior Minister of State (Education and Communications and Information) Janil Puthucheary – fronting some of the discussions on the matter.

Even so, Mr Inderjit Singh felt that the 4G PAP leaders could have done more in taking the lead in some of the debates on issues related to national security, the economy and transport. While Mr Heng's performance during this year's Budget debate stood out, he said the other younger Ministers could have done more in convincing Singaporeans why the impending GST hike had to be announced this year.

On the opposition front, Dr Felix Tan noted that WP's newly-minted chief Pritam Singh has been more vocal on certain issues.

Assoc Prof Eugene Tan said he expects the younger WP leaders to take on a higher profile for the second half of the Parliament's term, while the PAP's 4G leaders seek to demonstrate that they are equal to the task of leading the country.

A major Cabinet reshuffle will take place before Parliament reconvenes next month. On Saturday (April 21), the Prime Minister said the changes will be announced next week and “will involve almost all of the ministries”.

The 4G leaders are also heavily involved in the drafting of the President’s Address, which will be delivered by President Halimah Yacob at the opening of the second half of the 13th Parliament on May 7 to set out the Government’s priorities, policies and programmes for the remainder of its current term.

### **On the agenda**

Among the items topping the agenda when Parliament reconvenes next month would be the findings by the Select Committee studying deliberate online falsehoods.

The 10-member committee wrapped up eight days of public hearings last month, which took in oral evidence from 65 witnesses including local and overseas experts, as well as representatives from technology and media giants such as Facebook, Twitter and Google. A total of 170 written representations were submitted to the committee as well.

Other priorities for the Government include the leadership succession issue – with the identity of Mr Lee’s successor set to become clearer in the second half of the 13th Parliament – and addressing social inequality, the political observers said.

In fact, if the first half was anything to go by, parliamentary debates are set to become even more intense, as the current term of Government enters its final leg and the drumbeat of the next GE gets louder.

“The second half will be critical for the PAP 4G leadership and the WP new leadership to show their effectiveness in their new roles and this will also determine how they can swing votes (to) their sides. We can expect much more aggressive debates... as the stakes are very high, (and) will directly affect the outcome of the next GE,” said Mr Inderjit Singh.