

## The Low Thia Khiang Effect

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As one 52-year-old Hougang resident put it, summing up the sentiment behind the Workers' Party's win last night: "Low Thia Khiang takes care of us very well. As long as he's around, the trunk is there. Upgrading or not, it makes no difference to us anymore. We've adapted to life here already."

It was what many saw as an unsurprising end to the by-election, with the party's Mr Png Eng Huat securing the Hougang Single-Member Constituency with 62.09 per cent of the valid vote.

The WP's two-decade track record in Hougang - which has been an Opposition stronghold since 1991 with Mr Low, WP's secretary-general, at its helm - made it a tough challenge for the People's Action Party's Desmond Choo from the get go.

As resident Johnny Tan, 45, told Today: "I have always been loyal ... The records have proven that they can take care of us, so why change?"

### **A Shift In Mood**

But what was more significant, in analysts' eyes, was the margin of the WP's win.

Mr Choo's feat in having chipped away at the WP's share of the votes, and increasing his own by 2.71 percentage points from the 35.2 per cent he managed in last year's General Election, was evidence that the PAP also "won" in some small ways, some observers felt.

Dr Lam Peng Er believes the "key reason" was a shift in the ground sentiment.

"I sense that the mood of the crowd was quite different compared to a year ago," said the senior research fellow at the National University of Singapore's East Asian Institute, who attended rallies during both last year's GE and the by-election. "The palpable anger which I felt in GE2011 was significantly diffused."

Dr Lam pointed to measures the Government had taken since the GE, such as reducing ministerial salaries, ramping up the construction of flats and giving more attention to public transport. "Singaporeans know there are outstanding issues, but some things will take time to work out. At least the PAP put in some effort to mitigate, address some of this unhappiness," he said.

Clearly, however, national issues still weighed on the minds of voters.

Without revealing the party they voted for, many of the 30 residents that Today spoke to last night said the issues that factored into their vote included the rising cost of living, healthcare, exorbitant housing prices and issues of democracy.

### **The Desmond Choo Factor**

Other observers pointed to the inroads made by Mr Choo over the last year.

They felt that residents have gotten to know him better, and the fact that he stayed on to doggedly work the Hougang ground after his 2011 loss earned people's belief in him.

"Youth is on his side," added NUS Associate Professor Bilveer Singh, who suspects his support came mostly from younger residents. "If he remains in the next two to three elections, he may make a difference."

Next to Mr Png, Mr Choo came across as more cosmopolitan. But he has also learnt how to pitch the heartland message. "The PAP has added a new chapter in its playbook by allowing Desmond Choo to go with quite a different message - not the bread and butter issues ... but how he talked about his care for the residents, his commitment to the residents and how he is really trying to connect on an emotional level," said senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies Dr Gillian Koh.

### **The WP's Performance**

Two observers, in fact, were surprised that the PAP had not done better.

Nominated Member of Parliament Eugene KB Tan said: "One would have thought that the PAP made very little headway despite having a good campaign and fairly strong candidate in Desmond Choo."

The assistant professor of law at the Singapore Management University said he had expected the PAP to perform better, given that the "WP didn't have a good campaign at all" and there were "unnecessary distractions", such as Dr Poh Lee Guan's almost-entry into the by-election and Mr Yaw (Shin Leong)'s apology to Hougang.

Some feel the WP's performance contributed to the dip in its vote-share, from the 64.8 per cent that former MP for Hougang Mr Yaw received before being expelled from the party amid allegations of infidelity.

Former NMP Siew Kum Hong said he "expected a bigger swing toward the PAP". The WP had been "a little disappointing" in this by-election, and the issues that arose, such as the leaked CEC minutes, were "damaging" to the party's campaign, he noted.

"They didn't control the agenda as well as in the GE. They seemed to let the PAP dictate the agenda more," said Mr Siew, pointing to how Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean's attack on the WP over the Non-Constituency Member of Parliament issue kept the WP from focusing on its own agenda.

Conversely, while other observers felt Mr Teo's comments did not have a significant impact on the PAP's showing, Mr Siew believes some voters may have been "put off" by such "negative campaigning". Hougang resident Brandon Tan, 26, an accountant, said he "didn't really like the campaigning style" of the challenger's party and the use of what he called "low blows".

But all in all, watchers agree that both Mr Png and Mr Choo ran clean campaigns.

### **Upgrading And The By-Election Effect?**

Analysts were divided on whether issues such as upgrading and the "by-election effect" swung votes in either party's favour. Asst Prof Tan said residents may have voted for the WP as a show of protest against the "unfair treatment" they have been subject to over the years, for instance, being among the last wards to be upgraded.

But Dr Koh said: "We've heard some residents saying they would really like to see rebuilding programmes ... with Desmond Choo saying in his campaign that's what he would provide, it would have been attractive to some of the voters."

Dr Koh also reckoned that the by-election could have swung votes to the PAP, as residents would be already assured of the WP's presence in Parliament.

### **Out Of Loyalty**

All said and done, however, as Asst Prof Tan noted: "The results showed that voters were, in the end, prepared to go with the WP's track record in Hougang over the last 20 years, and to keep faith."

"This idea of a First World Parliament seems to deeply resonate with the voters in Hougang," he added. To continue voting for the Opposition and not "caving in to carrots" was something that would strike residents as "a badge of honour", he said. They could also act "out of loyalty" to WP's Mr Low.

Resident Fat Leong, 44, said: "Mr Low has always been a capable man. He's honest, and he's never pushed us to vote for him, instead he laid the issues out, and told us to make our own decisions. I will always believe in him. We don't fall for the usual promises of upgrading anymore."

Analysts pointed to how the WP has managed to intimately intertwine the Hougang spirit with the party.

Describing the constituency as a "cosy community", Dr Lam said: "The WP in the past 21 years has conflated the Hougang spirit with the WP. The PAP can send anyone there, will it make any difference? I don't think so."

### **The Road Ahead**

While it will continue to be an uphill task for the PAP to win over the Hougang voters, the WP will also have its work cut out. Mr Siew said the party will have to improve its performance in Parliament, while addressing issues raised during the by-election, such as its party discipline.

Said Dr Lam: "They have to manage the town council very well, make sense in Parliament and must not appear to be disjointed. They have to, imagewise at least, show to Singaporeans they are running a tight ship."

It is a "very valid and important question" whether support for WP would be as strong if Mr Low were not around, said a resident Ms Chua.

"It really depends on how the party performs. The new blood came in only last year. If they are as sincere, genuine and committed to serve us, Hougang will continue to support the WP. But if there are no worthy candidates, we are all thinking people, we may change our votes," said the 26-year-old healthcare worker.