

## **Govt 'should consider' review of town councils**

**Report notes some calls to depoliticise town councils so that issue of handover between political parties will not arise**

***Neo Chai Chin & Eugene Neubronner***

***Today***, 4 May 2013

The Government should consider a strategic and comprehensive review of town councils, given the entities have operated in their "current form" for 20 years and the "fundamental tension" in their dual objectives. These were among the remarks made by the Ministry of National Development (MND) Town Council Review Team in its 37-page report released yesterday.

The team observed that the "party political nature of TCs (town councils) operating in a competitive context raises a constant risk of politicising town council administration", MND Permanent Secretary Benny Lim wrote in his letter dated April 30 to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

"This may not always lead to outcomes beneficial to the interests of residents," said Mr Lim.

The twin objectives of town councils, first established in 1989, were to enable elected Members of Parliament (MPs) to take charge of their constituents' estate and allow each town to develop a distinct character, as well as to make MPs accountable to their direct voters for the running of the estate. These have been largely fulfilled, according to the report.

The broader issue meriting further study is that of ensuring continuity of services to residents in the event of a change of MPs, especially if they are from different political parties, said Mr Lim.

"The team recommends that the Government consider a strategic and comprehensive review of TCs," he wrote. The team, however, did not suggest any terms of reference for the review and left the recommendation open ended.

The report noted some public sentiments that town councils should be de-politicised so that the issue of handover between political parties would not arise.

There are others who feel this would improve the governance of town councils, as the MND could regulate and oversee them "without perception issues".

Most MPs and experts contacted by TODAY leaned towards retaining the political nature of town councils.

"Town councils are the connection between the people and the Government," said political scientist Bridget Welsh of the Singapore Management University. "You can't de-politicise local government."

Veteran MP Inderjit Singh (Ang Mo Kio GRC) said the concept of town councils arose from a “well-thought” process, giving MPs some amount of responsibility and the resources to improve things quickly.

One of the roles of MPs is to improve the lives of residents, and town councils can roll out changes — in maintenance, for instance — “a lot faster than going through a government agency”, he said. “The danger of changing it is that things may slow down and the MPs will not be responsible anymore.”

Political analyst Gillian Koh disagreed that there was tension between the public service and political roles of town councils. “It’s designed precisely for situations where there’s a high level of political contestation,” argued Dr Koh, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies.

“And now that you have more wards under Opposition parties, this is a time when each MP has to show his or her worth. Each party has to show that their MPs are capable, at least in this respect of managing the estate.”

Associate Professor Yu Shi-Ming, head of the Department of Real Estate at the National University of Singapore, felt it would be difficult to change too drastically the original objectives of town councils.

However, given how their roles and functions have grown, in scale and complexity, Associate Professor Yu — part of the resource panel in 2009 that advised the MND on criteria to use in assessing the performance of town councils — said a review in these areas would be timely.

He suggested curtailing the size of town councils, which can manage up to three constituencies under the law, “so that the effects of decentralisation could be better achieved”.

Corporate governance expert Mak Yuen Teen, however, supported the depoliticisation of town councils.

“I think there is no need for town councils, whose main role is really estate management and maintenance, to have MPs on them. You can just hire a private firm to manage and elect a board of directors which are not political appointees to oversee it,” said Associate Professor Mak, likening such a set-up to a management committee and agent in a condominium, but on a mega scale.

If the majority of Singaporeans want town councils to be depoliticised, their opinion should be respected, said Mr Singh.

“I can see where these people are coming from, it makes it easier when the constituencies change. So maybe residents want to have the peace of mind that changeovers don’t affect the support of estates,” he said.

Should there be a comprehensive review, areas to examine could include the operating model town councils should take and their regulatory framework, suggested MPs and the experts.