

WP politician challenges Chan Chun Sing's claim that the EBRC is independent

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Workers' Party (WP) politician Yee Jenn Jong has challenged Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing's recent remarks that the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee (EBRC) is independent.

The EBRC is responsible for recommending amendments to the number and boundaries of electoral wards prior to each election. The Government announced that the EBRC was convened in August last year, signalling that the next election is imminent.

Mr Chan was asked whether the EBRC can be completely independent of the Prime Minister's Office, at the Singapore Perspectives conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies on Monday (20 Jan).

The Minister, who serves as the ruling party's second assistant secretary-general, replied that the committee comprises of public servants with knowledge on matters like population and demographic changes and that he feels that the committee is independent and professional.

He said: "I have never doubted their independence. They do their job professionally. No matter who does the work, how it is done, you have to report to somebody and present it to be approved and issued."

The independence of the EBRC has remained a hot button topic in Singapore. The committee is chaired by the secretary to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Tan Kee Yong – a senior civil servant who has publicly defended PM Lee in the past, most notably in 2017 when he rebutted accusations PM Lee's siblings Lee Wei Ling and Lee Hsien Yang made during the explosive 38 Oxley Road dispute.

Mr Tan also chaired the EBRC in 2015, prior to that year's general election. Certain recommendations the committee were made, such as the recommendation to have Joo Chiat SMC absorbed into Marine Parade GRC, drew backlash and sparked questions over the neutrality of the EBRC.

Joo Chiat SMC, which had been a single member ward from 1997 to 2015, was absorbed into a group ward ahead of the 2015 election after it was hotly contested in the 2011 election. WP candidate Yee Jenn Jong had lost the ward by just a hair of votes, earning a vote-share of 48.99 per cent, in 2011.

Asserting that the proof for whether the EBRC is truly independent lies in what the Government does, Mr Yee Jenn Jong challenged the Government to make certain changes to the committee to make it independent.

In a Facebook post published on Tuesday (21 Jan), Mr Yee suggested that the Government could appoint other independent members to the committee, make the committee's minutes of discussions open to the public, and provide better justification of changes instead of publishing "skimpy reports".

He also called on the Government to set a reasonable time gap from the publication of the EBRC's report to polling day. There is presently no set time between the release of the EBRC report to the calling of the election.

The time between the release of the EBRC's report and polling day has ranged from as little as 17 days to as long as six months, in Singapore history. Opposition parties will need to wait for the EBRC to release its report to find out how the boundaries have been dissected.

Recommending that the Government set a fixed time frame of 6-12 months between the release of the EBRC report and polling day, Mr Yee asked: "What is the urgency of having polls just immediately after changing boundaries?"

Finally, the WP member said that the EBRC should not report to the PM and pointed out that many countries practice having such committees report to an independent entity outside of the political parties.

While the EBRC has taken between two to four months to complete the review in the past three elections, it has been taking longer than usual to make its recommendations this time around. The EBRC was convened in August last year but the Government revealed earlier this month that the committee has yet to complete its deliberations.

There is strong speculation that the EBRC report will only be released after Budget 2020, which has been scheduled for 18 Feb, and that an election will be called shortly after the Budget.