

About complaints, condo – and a car

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SOMEWHERE towards the end of the Q and A session with the representatives of political parties, a woman from the audience got to the microphone and really levelled into the opposition parties. She told them to “stop complaining” about how tough it was for them to make inroads and simply put the by-election strategy into effect in the next general election so people wouldn’t fear that the PAP would be thrown out of government. “Then we will see how people vote.”

That would be interesting. It would put the PAP in a bind given that one of the reasons for the big swing towards the PAP in GE2015 was fear of an opposition landslide. But let’s focus on the “stop complaining” portion. Because that was what it (almost) became – a complaints session – when the IPS hosted a panel from the PAP, Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), Singapore People’s Party (SPP) and National Solidarity Party (NSP) yesterday to talk about their respective party’s agenda post-GE2015. The Workers’ Party (WP), in case you were wondering, declined the invitation to speak to the room-full of Singapore’s intelligentsia.

Dr Chee Soon Juan of the SDP, who had opened his speech by saying that being invited to speak at such a forum wasn’t a “daily occurrence”, launched almost immediately into the lack of exposure in MSM and getting no encouragement when he asked to speak at conferences here. It was a litany of complaints – about how the G has control over MSM and how opposition political parties were relegated to just several minutes of air-time every five years.

There was no way anyone could go into depth on serious issues of the day such as low productivity and immigration policy, over which there was a “frightening lack of discussion” from the PAP. Nor was the intelligentsia leading the discussion. Should Singapore implode (my word) because of the PAP’s fear of losing control and the lack of fresh ideas, “all of us would be complicit”.

Dr Chee:

"Much analysis about the whys and wherefores that contributed to the results in GE, but all in all could the results have turned out any other way? Each and every election I point out after Polling Day you will get headline in Straits Times... ensuing weeks and months of commentary after analysis will tell you because of this and that PAP get victory. One thing you seldom hear is that PAP wins because election system is neither free nor fair. Party controls print and broadcast media uses for its own partisan purposes. The Election Department works from under the PMO. Sure, the opposition is given air time and newspaper columns during the election period, but when you appear on CNA once in five years for 15 mins and given all of five minutes to tell the electorate about plans... you might as well invoke the spirit of Houdini to pull off a feat like that. We have serious issues to confront, all of which determine how we live, threaten our identity and existence of Singaporeans... there is a frightening lack of discussion in the direction PAP is taking us. IPS and NUS intelligentsia don't seem to be encouraging or organising enough of these discussions and debates to propel a knowledge-based society that we so desperately need. I wrote to IPS

and NUSS ask if they could organise forums where we get to present policies and ideas. Response hasn't been very encouraging. Everytime I write to ST my op-ed pieces are rejected... When the time comes and chickens come home to roost then our problem becomes intractable because the PAP did not want change, and we out of fear, meekly comply. We will find ourselves in a future where even the PAP cannot escape. We, all of us in this room, will become complicit in that ruin.

It did seem rather odd for a guest speaker to make such charges at a seminar. After all, he now had the platform, but much of his speech as well as his replies to questions, painted the picture of an Opposition hobbled by the PAP at every which turn. When IPS' Gillian Koh suggested that he could have made better use of social media, he pointed out that according to the IPS survey, voters trusted MSM more than they did social media, which is somewhat odd given that Dr Chee is well-known for lambasting MSM for being biased against the Opposition. In fact, he had earlier taken jibes at the post-election newspaper headlines about PAP's "landslide victory" or strong mandate published at every election when "the elections are neither free nor fair".

Mrs Lina Chiam of the SPP didn't touch on media access, perhaps because she had a stint as a Non-constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP), but she complained about access to condominiums. Even while her husband Mr Chiam See Tong was Member of Parliament (MP) for Potong Pasir, he was't allowed into condominiums, not even to distribute leaflets. She also said she had no idea what else she needed to do to wrest Potong Pasir back from the PAP. She had been speaking up in Parliament, doing weekly Thursday visits but was at loss about what else needed doing. What she lacked was voter incentives, she said, like the \$5 million provided to PAP's Sitoh Yih Pin. Perhaps if Mr Chiam had that money to upgrade the "run down" ward, the SPP could have kept Potong Pasir. She had another request: that electoral boundaries should remain fixed.

Mrs Chiam:

"We acknowledge the percentage swing to PAP: it was a difficult battle fought in a difficult climate especially in a year when Singapore celebrated the Golden Jubilee...The Opposition continues to face a lot of obstacles in our work...we continue to face difficulties gaining access to condominium residences even during official campaigning period. We held a tea session in a condominium only last year even though the GRC had been held by us for 30 years. The same condo refused our distribution of materials and there is a sizeable proportion of condos in Singapore. They never had no opportunity to meet and evaluate opposition candidates... I appeal to Singaporeans for their good sense of fair play, I believe this situation hinders right and responsibility of residents to vote wisely and in an informed manner during the general elections...I hope the ruling party will look into this aspect. The election committee should look into possibility of using fixed electorate boundaries to ensure a greater connection between representatives and the electorate that will reflect geographical and community identities...promote stronger relationship between people and GRC...the Opposition have to accept that it has to operate in unlevel playing field against a loaded electoral system."

The term "uneven playing field" was uttered frequently by Dr Chee and Mrs Chiam. Seated at one side was PAP's Ong Ye Kung, who had started out on a humble and conciliatory note,

acknowledging the need for “contestation of ideas”. What was more important was what happened after this phase of contestation.

Mr Ong said that it is “most important to have the attitude, when we have a cacophony of voices and opinions, to be able to distill what are the choices of Singapore and debate them that is most important in terms of encouraging a contestation of ideas... As we discuss many issues media to minimum wage to others, it is always tempting to look at every issue from a political lens... every challenge (becomes) an issue of white versus blue, orange versus red... but I think Singapore we are too small, probably the world (is) too dangerous for us to dissipate our energy through internal friction. Much better for us to harness all this energy and continue to become a shining red dot for SG100.”

Acting Minister for Education Mr Ong said he was for a free media provided that it gave the “right of reply”, to which Dr Chee said he didn’t get his right of reply to points made in the media. An SDP member piled on the pressure, asking Mr Ong if the Elections Department should be moved out from the Prime Minister’s Office so that it could be independent. Mr Ong responded by saying he wouldn’t question the impartiality of the Elections Department, just as he wouldn’t do so for any civil servant.

Then blogger Mr Alex Au added a zinger: Since the PAP has a hefty mandate, maybe it could afford to enact tough policies, like repeal Section 377A of the Penal Code which criminalised homosexual sex. Mr Ong said he did not think that was the right way to expend political capital. “Sometimes it’s not for the Government to deal with it. You can be the largest animal in the jungle but you are not the jungle. We may be the government of the day but we are not larger than society. Some issues are for society to evolve and to move to a new position.”

Mr Ong:

"My take is also that the so called victory is more narrow than it seems. if you look at 2011, the Opposition took six seats...look at the seats that PAP lost: six in 2011, one SMC, one GRC of five; and in 2015 if you look at results in terms of seats lost, it’s the same...is this really that big a victory in 2015?...[I] don’t think it is a victory that is so jubilant to be celebrated...moving forward it will be a balance of continuity and change. Continuity in terms of fundamental values approaches to governance...At the same time...policies have to change...for voters during this period they want contestation of ideas, not theatrics, not parties attacking each other but genuine contestation of ideas...that whole debate or contestation of ideas should give us a stronger consensus to move forward. We should be able to welcome ideas from all political colours, whether its white, blue, yellow or orange."

Mr Lim Tean of the NSP steered clear of any kind of playing field, choosing instead to focus on the future of the Opposition. The notion that the Opposition should act as a “check and balance” or as a co-driver, as WP chief Mr Low Thia Kiang put it, was no longer relevant, he said. The Opposition had to drive its own policy car – not hitch a ride or modify it – and become a true national opposition party. Replying to a question on whether small political parties could survive in an environment in which the WP seemed to be streets ahead in voter’s minds, he said it would

be presumptuous to think that the WP would always be in pole position. Its margin of victory in Aljunied GRC in GE2015 was just one per cent, he noted.

Mr Lim:

"Like many I was surprised at the scale of national swing towards the PAP... but unlike many others I am neither depressed nor dismayed at the prospects for the opposition parties going ahead. I think these are exciting times for opposition party, provided they are willing to adapt and evolve... if they do I think it will bring immense benefit to them and the Singapore voters. I do believe in this new era after GE2015, the time is over where the opposition parties can simply claim to be a check and balance on the PAP. Mr Low Thia Kiang's analogy of 2011, of the opposition parties being co-drivers with the PAP is no longer relevant... Opposition parties have to be prepared to drive their own policy cars and persuade Singaporean voters to drive in their cars. It is no longer possible for us to hitch a ride on the policy car of the PAP, and to hope to modify a car that does not belong to us. That is the policy of the NSP in the coming years. Moving forward, our political agenda is rooted in one word which is "relevance". In next five years we intend to become very relevant to the life of Singaporeans. We will rebuild ourselves and become a true national party."

It's a pity that his notion of a true national opposition party was not further explored. Given the troubles that had plagued NSP just before the election, it would be tough for the NSP to fulfil this new vision, but unlike Dr Chee who castigated the intelligentsia, Mr Lim took the opportunity to ask them for a helping hand to foster an "intellectual flowering" of ideas.