

Backup plan or ATTENTION SEEKER?

Eugene Wee, Esther Ng
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If it was brinksmanship, then Dr Poh Lee Guan was the first to blink.

He had told The New Paper on Tuesday that he would throw his name into the hat on Nomination Day for the Hougang by-election.

But the Workers' Party (WP) veteran was nowhere in sight in the nomination hall at Serangoon Junior College yesterday.

Instead, he was with three people in a coffee shop at Block 703, Hougang Avenue 2, about a three-minute walk from the college.

Dr Poh has been a WP stalwart for more than a decade, standing as a party candidate first in the 2001 General Election, then in the 2006 and 2011 GEs.

From 2001 to 2006, he was also the party's assistant secretary-general. In 2010, Dr Poh stepped down from the party's central executive committee (CEC).

He is a familiar face in Hougang, where he has served as vice-chairman of the Hougang Constituency Committee and as a town councillor.

Twice overlooked

Yet twice he was overlooked by his party as a candidate for Hougang, a seat of 23,000-plus voters that WP has held since 1991.

When WP secretary-general Low Thia Khiang moved to contest, and then win, Aljunied GRC in last year's GE, it was Mr Yaw Shin Leong who stepped in to hold on to Hougang for WP.

After the WP booted out Mr Yaw in February for refusing to account for his alleged extramarital affairs, Dr Poh thought he would have a shout to stand in Hougang, a party insider said.

But he found out soon enough that he had been bypassed again, this time in favour of Mr Png Eng Huat, as the man to retain WP's stronghold.

Dr Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies said: "There seems to be contestation within the WP on cadreship, candidacy and leadership in the past year leading to at least three former candidates leaving it in a very public manner."

"WP seems to be a party on the move, in transition after its breakthrough in the 2011 General Election."

"Some will fit into those plans, but it does not appear that everyone has bought into those plans and decisions."

Was the writing on the wall for Dr Poh?

Dr Koh said: "It doesn't look good for Dr Poh. The Workers' Party issued a categorical statement as soon as word was out that Dr Poh had picked up papers to say that they had only one candidate and it was not him."

What was Dr Poh's gambit in getting a political donation certificate that would allow him to be nominated as a candidate?

Said political observer Eugene Tan: "He's trying to draw attention to himself, but in the process destroying his credibility and undermining his party's standing at a critical time with unnecessary source of confusion."

WP vice-chairman Mohammed Rahizan Yaacob said Dr Poh's interest in the by-election was "quite sudden".

Mr Mohammed Rahizan found out about it only after reading the newspapers yesterday. "I've not heard anything about this previously... As far as the WP is concerned, it is never an individualistic show."

When reporters asked Dr Poh at the coffee shop why he had applied for the political donation certificate, he said: "For critical issues, you need a backup, right? So I'm the backup, lah, that's all. Nothing wrong."

But the top brass in WP had no clue what he was up to. And Mr Low told reporters yesterday that WP had no backup plan.

Dr Poh said he didn't receive any instructions to do this and that he didn't tell party chairman Sylvia Lim about it.

On the quiet

He said: "I was doing it quietly and then this was the first time the Election Department announced the certificate was given out."

"I was trying to do it very quietly without upsetting everything as an unofficial backup, that's it."

He denied he had done it for publicity, insisting he was a "spare tyre" to be kept in the boot and that he is still a party member who will give his support to Mr Png.

He also denied telling The New Paper that he would be running in the by-election.

The New Paper had approached Dr Poh on Tuesday at the Henderson Road campus of the East Asia Institute of Management, where he is a lecturer.

When asked if he was standing in Hougang, he had replied: "Yes."

Yesterday, after speaking to reporters for about 15 minutes, Dr Poh got into a car and was driven away.

Associate Professor Tan said of Dr Poh: "His actions are unilateral and renegade. He's taken himself up to be a backup, drawing attention to himself. It's just an excuse (rather) than a justification."

"This is not a new party, but an experienced one. They botched their forms in 2001 and since have learnt their lesson."

Mr Low would not say if Dr Poh will face disciplinary action. (See report above.)

Of Dr Poh's future in the party, Prof Tan, who is a Nominated Member of Parliament, said: "He's chosen a most inappropriate time to make a public statement. He's given an exit interview."