

Is this a sign of future rivalry?

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YES to more opposition MPs YES to smaller GRCs YES to more single seats NO to more NMPs

COULD a new battle line have opened up in Parliament, fuelled in part by a snub from Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong?

Speaking in Parliament yesterday about the changes to Singapore's political system announced the day before, the Workers' Party's Sylvia Lim was largely amicable, if cautious.

Increase the number of Single Member Constituencies? It's 'a step in the right direction', she said.

Increase the minimum number of opposition members of Parliament from three to nine? 'Supportable', she said.

Reduce the size of GRCs? It's an 'overdue' move.

But on one point, she refused to budge.

That was the move to make the Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) scheme permanent.

'The Workers' Party (WP) continues to be against the NMP scheme as we believe that MPs must contest the election as an essential precondition, to obtain some sort of mandate from the people,' she said.

Key phrase, of course, was 'some sort'.

Why was Ms Lim, who, as a Non-Constituency MP, is in Parliament only as the best loser in the general elections 2006, unwilling to cut the NMPs some slack?

NMPs have been around for 19 years.

They have helped the opposition's cause.

They have presented more viewpoints in Parliamentary discussions.

Is it a matter of principle? But the other changes she agreed to dealt with matters of principle, too.

The changes were concessions; the principles behind them - for example, the need for GRCs - haven't changed much.

Still, for these, Ms Lim was willing to compromise, play nice.

Not so the NMP scheme. Why?

To be fair, the WP isn't the only one to have long opposed the NMP scheme.

Since it was first mooted in 1981, the NMP scheme has faced strong opposition from many quarters, including PAP MPs like Dr Tan Cheng Bock and Mr Leong Horn Kee.

It was precisely to gain their support that the scheme was not made compulsory, so that each new Parliament could decide for itself whether or not to have NMPs.'

Not backing down

But now, the scheme is permanent. Ms Lim, however, refuses to back down.

Why no compromise?

Could it be due to what PM Lee said on Wednesday when, with a hearty laugh, he praised NMPs, pointing out that they have sometimes 'outshone' the opposition MPs in Parliament?

For opposition MPs who fought tooth and nail to get into Parliament, it must have hurt.

How could they be outgunned by NMPs who walked through the doors with nary a battle scar from the campaign trail, who don't spend their nights at Meet-the-People Sessions, and who don't ever have to worry about political survival?

Could Ms Lim's snub be a first salvo, a sign of a rivalry to come?

At the same time, it will also be interesting to see how the dynamics among opposition parties, some publicly divided by in-fighting, will evolve from here.

The changes announced by PM Lee will see a guaranteed nine opposition MPs, probably from different political affiliations, fly the opposition's flag in Parliament.

Stronger rivalry?

Will the rivalries intensify, now that the stakes are upped?

Or will it help the opposition grow and mature, sharpen them, and mould them into future elected MPs?

Said Dr Gillian Koh, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies: 'Whether competition among opposition politicians, and between them and NMPs, is healthy or destructive depends on how they manage themselves according to due processes, the tone of their debates, and how they wish to mobilise or alienate citizens that they say they represent.'

What Singaporeans will ultimately see, she said, is opposition politicians taking on each other as much as they might take on the PAP MPs.

So new battle lines, new tensions, old rivalries revived and new rivalries born - they're all par for the (democratic) course.

'That is what pluralism is about,' said Dr Koh.