

'I've Learnt the Hard Way'

PAP MP Vikram Nair tells TNP that online criticism of his Budget Debate speech is part of learning process

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Netizens have labelled him an "attack dog" who has been planted by the People's Action Party (PAP) to oppose issues raised by Opposition Members of Parliament (MPs).

Is PAP MP Vikram Nair one?

"No, definitely not," he told *The New Paper* on Thursday.

And no, he has not been assigned any "role" by his party, he was quick to add.

Although he had engaged Opposition MPs in earlier Parliament sessions, the labels and accusations came in fast and furious online mainly after Mr Nair's Budget Debate speech on Feb 29.

The speech, which addressed in some detail Workers' Party MP Chen Show Mao's delivery earlier in that session, had two elements which netizens found offensive.

The first was Mr Nair's comment on how he found it "hurtful" that Mr Chen had implied that the Government had not been doing enough to help poorer Singaporeans.

The second was when he likened one of Mr Chen's proposed investment concepts to a Nigerian e-mail scam, where recipients are urged to transfer funds in return for a supposed pay-off later.

Mr Nair wanted to know how these ideas would work, as Mr Chen had previously said that his proposals would not require any revenue as they were self-funding investments. (See excerpts of speech on facing page.)

Said netizen Alvin Gonzalez: "I can't help but think that he (Mr Nair) was given the role of 'attack dog'. If you watch closely, some are given the role of good guys, some bad guys and a few the role of 'attack dogs'.

"Or in other words, the good, the bad and the ugly."

Several others who agreed with Mr Gonzalez accused Mr Nair of being unable to manage his emotions, while some compared him to Cabinet minister K. Shanmugam (Law and Foreign Affairs).

Said one netizen: "They (Mr Nair and Mr Shanmugam) often take a very antagonistic approach when challenging Opposition speeches."

Mr Nair told TNP on Thursday that he was not aware that the party assigns roles in any official or formal way.

"There's no assignment to 'attack so-and-so'," he said.

He added that it is commonplace, however, for members of the House to offer each other suggestions in terms of the issues to be raised.

Subsequently, it is up to him to craft his speech.

"Our speeches are not vetted, so I take full responsibility for whatever I say," he said.

He explained that his style is to prepare points and then speak off the cuff, rather than read off an entire script.

After the Budget Debate speech, which some members of the public found contentious, Mr Nair said some fellow PAP MPs told him that he was "too aggressive".

Others felt his tone could be "varied".

"I had intended the tone to be one of scepticism, as I was probing Mr Chen for elaboration.

"As for the scam comment, I meant it as a joke. But my attempt at irony and humour were misunderstood and some of it also misinterpreted," he said.

The former school and Cambridge University debater admitted to Lianhe Zaobao in a separate interview that he had gone overboard with his comments.

He told the Chinese daily that his intention was to motivate Mr Chen to better explain the feasibility of his proposed investment concepts.

Had Mr Chen's explanation been reasonable, he would have been supportive.

He also said that as his opponent was a lawyer and an economist, he believed Mr Chen would be able to rebut the arguments he had put forth.

Felt bad

But when Mr Chen did not, Mr Nair felt bad and he then stopped his line of questioning.

Following feedback, the PAP MP said he intends to tweak his tone and speaking style.

He told Lianhe Zaobao that he would never use such a sarcastic tone to debate in Parliament again and he said that, in future, he would be mindful to speak simply and courteously.

Referring to the online brickbats, he told The New Paper: "I've learnt the hard way, but it's part of the learning process."

He added that he has always seen parliamentary debates as a chance to "engage the other side of the House".

He also felt that what he did stemmed from a "natural instinct" to defend the party when he feels it has been unfairly attacked.

"If I, as a member of the party, do not speak up for it, who will?" he said.

Political observers that TNP spoke to felt that our current Parliament with more Opposition MPs would naturally result in livelier debates.

Law lecturer Eugene Tan from the Singapore Management University said such an environment, however, may be "somewhat unsettling to some" who may be used to parliamentary sittings being placid.

Still, he believes a more engaged debate is the right way forward.

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh agreed.

She felt that an increased number of Opposition MPs in Parliament allows them to become "more rigorous and vigorous in questioning government proposals in the House".

Mr Tan cautioned that this cannot be about "scoring debating points".

"It has to result in better law-making and policy-making. It has to result in all MPs and the Government raising their game, which in turn will mean Singaporeans are the ultimate beneficiaries," he said.

Both Mr Tan and Dr Koh agreed that there are PAP MPs with expertise and interest in certain areas, but disagreed on whether this translated to them being given specific roles as a result.

Said Dr Koh: "It would appear that some (PAP MPs) have been assigned certain roles in debates based on their skills and competency."

She described Mr Nair as a "champion debater" with a "quick mind".

"Clearly, the PAP hopes they are playing to their strengths, with him asking very pointed questions of the Opposition's positions.

"In the same way, some might expect Mr Pritam Singh and Mr Chen Show Mao to do the same," she said.

On the other hand, Mr Tan said he was "sceptical" of the view that there are PAP MPs specially tasked with rebutting the Opposition.

He did not think that Mr Nair had been appointed to serve that function.

He said: "I see Vikram as responding in his capacity as a PAP MP, without being prompted, who sought to get more details from Mr Chen Show Mao.

"If the PAP wanted a point man, it has to be a more senior MP and one who is particularly well-versed in the issue at hand."

– Additional reporting by Mok Xiao You and Valerie Koh

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– Mr Nair on the Nigerian scam comment