

KNOCK KNOCK, WHO'S THERE?

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NMPs to be picked from new group

THE new doors into Parliament will be opened to the familiar faces - candidates who lost at the polls, but whononetheless have toiled on the campaign trail, laying bare their backgrounds and plans for all to see.

But it will also be opened to those who didn't.

In announcing that the Nominated MP scheme will now be made permanent, PM Lee also called on another group to put forward candidates to be NMPs.

He called this group the 'people sector', consisting of the 'environmentalists, young activists, new citizens, and community and grassroots leaders'.

'This will give civil society a voice in Parliament and encourage civil society to grow and mature further,' he said.

But his decision to introduce a new group is intriguing because there are already representatives from six groups: Business and industry, the professions, labour movement, social and community organisations, tertiary education institutions, and the media, arts and sports.

A Special Select Committee of Parliament eventually makes the selection.

The six groups cover diverse fields, which overlap to some extent. Depending on how many hats a candidate wears, he or she may belong to more than one group.

So the intrigue lies in the question: Who is PM Lee trying to reach that he hasn't?

The environmentalists? We already had Dr Geh Min, former NMP and ex-president of the Nature Society.

New citizens? Are we really looking at an NMP from mainland China?

What about community and grassroots leaders? What does that mean?

Would, for example, former Aware president Josie Lau count as one?

What about someone from, say, the youth wing of the Workers' Party? Or the Young PAP? Veteran volunteer?

Or is it an open door for veteran grassroots volunteers, perhaps someone who has failed to be selected as a candidate for the elections?

The final category, spelled out by PM Lee, is 'young activists'.

But how young is young? Below 40? Post-65er? Or even younger - someone in his or her 20s?

tertiary education institutions, or the media, arts and sports?

Or could it be Mr Choo Zeng Xi?

The editor of socio-political blog The Online Citizen, who was the youngest person to speak at the Speakers' Corner (he was 15), is considered one of the rising stars of civil society today.

But wouldn't he, like Dr George, come under one of the old categories?

For some observers, the new door presents many possibilities.

Said Mr Lee Yoong Yoong, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies: 'It may be activists campaigning for rights which have been traditionally over-looked.'

'It may not necessarily be someone from the gay community. I don't know. But it could be them, if you look at recent events.'

'But even if it is, it will be someone with a more moderate viewpoint.'

Mr Stuart Koe, 36, chief executive of gay Asian Internet portal Fridae.com, said he's excited about the changes.

'It shows that as a country, we are evolving,' he said. 'It is possible that one day, I will put myself forward, to talk not only about gay issues, but also issues which concern other Singaporeans.' He added, however, that even without these changes, the gay community has been hoping that some day, one of them will contest the elections.

'Already, we have Loretta Chen (the artistic director of theatre group Zebra Crossing, who's a lesbian) running for NMP, so that's historical in itself,' said Mr Koe.

Mr Jolovan Wham, the president of the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics, welcomed the change, saying he may run one day too.

'I would be opportunistic about it and take the chance, even though I would not have proven myself at the polls,' he said. 'It's not a perfect system, but we just have to learn to negotiate the boundaries.'

A word of caution, amid the optimism, comes from former NMP Braema Mathi.

'The NMP and NCMP scheme has been useful and successful as a counterfoil to the GRC scheme that had evolved over the years, becoming larger and seemingly impenetrable for the opposition,' she said.

'But now, if we are talking about having smaller and fewer GRCs and more Single Member Constituencies (SMCs), it begs the question whether we need more NCMPs, NMPs...'

Her fear is that the opened doors, if not managed well, will become something else - an avenue for well meaning Singaporeans to shape the country with little accountability.