

## **Opposition leaders question DPM Heng on GST, immigration policy**

***Tham Yuen-C***

***The New Paper, 21 January 2020***

Leaders and members of opposition parties questioned Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat on the goods and services tax (GST), immigration and the elected presidency yesterday at the annual Singapore Perspectives conference, giving a preview of the issues that might dominate at the next general election.

The exchanges followed a speech by Mr Heng in which he set out the fourth-generation political leadership's pledge to work with Singaporeans in shaping the country's future and making the partnership a cornerstone policy.

Singapore Democratic Party chairman Paul Tambyah questioned the Government's decision to raise the GST, which he said is "acknowledged universally" as regressive.

The tax is set to go up by 7 per cent to 9 per cent some time between next year and 2025. But Mr Heng said Singapore's tax system as a whole is progressive, with more benefits going to lower-income groups.

He also said he had considered alternatives, but had less room to play with corporate and personal income taxes as people and companies can relocate easily.

Mr Goh Meng Seng, the Singapore People's Party chief, questioned him on the immigration policy, asking if society could become more divisive if the Government caved to the pressure of new citizens whose allegiance may not lie with Singapore.

Mr Heng said new citizens could indeed become a divisive force if people exploit the issue and "start casting doubts on the loyalty and fitness of new citizens".

Pointing to how some people have promulgated a narrative which pits born and bred Singaporeans against new citizens, Mr Heng said: "In that regard, I must say I'm very troubled that so many people are seeking to exploit these differences instead of making the effort to integrate them."

The issue of the elected presidency was raised by Progress Singapore Party (PSP) assistant secretary-general Leong Wai Mun. PSP leader, Dr Tan Cheng Bock, became ineligible to run in the 2017 presidential election after the eligibility criteria was tightened.

Mr Leong, who said he was speaking in a personal capacity, argued that such strict criteria would limit the pool of possible candidates and curtail the institution's effectiveness as a check on the Government.

Replying, Mr Heng said the president continues to play a very important role as custodian of Singapore's reserves, citing, for instance, that the Budget cannot be introduced in Parliament until the President has been satisfied it will not draw on past reserves.