

Too Lame? Too Late?

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In the run-up to the Hougang by-election next Saturday, the Workers' Party (WP) and People's Action Party (PAP) ran a campaign on issues.

Among the topics debated: the state of democracy in Singapore and lobbying for a new wet market.

Neither the WP's Mr Png Eng Huat nor the PAP's Mr Desmond Choo said anything about the man who had sparked the by-election in the first place.

Mr Yaw Shin Leong, the former Hougang Member of Parliament (MP) sacked by his party for failing to explain his alleged extra-marital affairs, was largely forgotten.

Until now.

Mr Yaw, who exited the political scene and the country in February, sent a letter of apology to Hougang voters yesterday.

Besides thanking residents for their patience during his nine-month term, Mr Yaw said: "I also wish to apologise for the inconvenience caused to you, for the whole episode and for having to go through the polls again as a result of my expulsion from the party."

He urged them to support the WP candidate, Mr Png.

"I hope that Hougang residents will continue to keep our Hougang spirit strong and keep the flame of parliamentary democracy alive by supporting the candidate in blue."

Not impressed

His former party was not impressed.

A posting on WP's Facebook page said: "We have noted the media release by Yaw Shin Leong. Yaw is no longer a member of the Workers' Party.

"We remain focused on supporting our candidate, Png Eng Huat, for the Hougang by-election."

Dr Gillian Koh, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, said Mr Yaw's apology was "another surprise from someone associated with the WP camp".

"Though it's a good thing that voters can exercise their democratic right to vote, his letter was not very helpful... It could further polarise the fence sitters," she added.

Nominated MP and Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan called Mr Yaw's letter a weak apology.

"He only apologised for the inconvenience caused. He didn't apologise for the fact that he abandoned voters and his party... It's a breach of trust," Associate Professor Tan said.

That's why the letter could turn out to be a bane for Mr Png.

Prof Tan explained: "Yaw's action presents the PAP with another opportunity to raise questions about how WP handled the matter.

"It doesn't clarify any doubts or concerns that voters may have. If it did, then it's a boon. But it doesn't."

Hougang resident James Koh, 40, dismissed Mr Yaw's letter.

"It has no effect on me. I will look at the two candidates and see who can serve Hougang better," the businessman said.

"If he had sent out the letter after he was expelled (over his affair, which is a private matter), people would forgive him if he had apologised then, rather than now during the campaign period."

But another Hougang resident, Mr Sebastian Yeo-Koh, said the letter was timely.

"The by-election is going on now. It can swing both ways... People may reconsider their votes after reading this letter," the 24-year-old student added.

The National University of Singapore's Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser said the letter gave Mr Png and the WP "a small benefit".

"It shows Yaw is still supportive of the party that expelled him. It also gives the impression that WP members have closed ranks and are not disunited," he added.

While the WP was terse over Mr Yaw's action, Mr Png was keen to highlight the party's ties with Hougang.

During yesterday's lunchtime walkabout to two coffee shops along Hougang Avenue 5, Mr Png mentioned how special Hougang was at least six times.

He told the media: "We've been here for 20 years. There is a kind of relationship, a very special relationship with the WP."

He also credited residents for not biting when the upgrading carrot was offered. "That part is special. That's something that not many constituencies will experience."

In contrast to PAP's Mr Choo, who walked the ground without party leaders, Mr Png was accompanied by bigwigs like party chief Low Thia Khiang and chairman Sylvia Lim. Aljunied MP Chen Show Mao and NCMP Yee Jenn Jong were also on hand to lend their support.

Asked about their involvement, Mr Png said: "We view Hougang as extremely important... For me, I think Hougang is so special. That's why the whole party is here. We view Hougang as a very, very special place to defend."

Mr Png also said the composition of Singapore's Parliament was "too lopsided", with the majority of MPs from the PAP.

It's something Mr Yaw alluded to as well in his letter.

But IPS' Dr Koh said: "While Yaw Shin Leong backs Png, his point about keeping the flame of parliamentary democracy alive is a bit exaggerated as there are other WP MPs in Parliament."