

Where has the money gone?

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The gloves are off.

Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean unleashed some of the sharpest verbal attacks in the election season so far when he took aim at the Worker's Party handling of Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council (AHPETC).

It was meant to be a Meet-the-Media session before the "sound and fury" of the election overwhelms the fundamentals of choosing a candidate to secure Singapore's future.

But the Minister of Home Affairs delivered some of the fury himself when he was asked about what his People's Action Party (PAP) would do if it wins back Aljunied GRC.

The first priority for the PAP, if elected, would be to "go in and sort out the mess in the town council", said Mr Teo.

The PAP's first assistant secretary-general noted that under the PAP previously, Aljunied GRC and Punggol East SMC were running healthy surpluses before they were amalgamated into AHPETC.

Mr Teo said: "Now the whole AHPETC is in deficit. How did that happen? How did a large surplus turn into deficit? Where did the money go?"

Mr Teo even took a swipe at AHPTEC chairman Sylvia Lim for her recent Instagram post, which fuelled rumours of her possibly running in Fengshan SMC.

The photo showed Ms Lim sampling fried oyster omelette with the caption "The taste of Fengshan — heavenly! #reasontowin".

Mr Teo said: "Now we see the chairman of the town council saying that Fengshan SMC looks quite delicious. What's going to happen? You're going to swallow up Fengshan? For what purpose? To serve the residents of Fengshan? Or is Fengshan delicious because you want to add it to the pot? And help the town council with the deficit?"

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Political analyst Eugene Tan said: "These potshots are clear indications that the gloves have come off even before the word go.

"PAP is clearly going on the offensive. Essentially, it is going for WP's Achilles' heel, which is the AHPETC issue."

Added the associate law professor at Singapore Management University: "It appears that PAP will keep hammering home this matter... And this may instead be perceived to be patronising to voters."

Meanwhile, Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh said this was an ongoing issue that will be brought up constantly throughout the hustings period.

"It is just inevitable that after four years, this issue will crop up, especially since PAP values accountability, transparency and honesty."

Party veteran Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong was also in a fighting mood during a speech last night. (See report above.)

On the selection of MPs, he said: "At the very least, they must be able to run a town council in a transparent, accountable and responsible manner."

Mr Teo said there is a difference between individual mistakes and major lapses in financial accounting. Armed with the Auditor-General Office report on the issue, he said it was a "blanket assessment that their financial accounts can't be relied upon. That's quite serious."

That was why he could not leave it alone, he said.

When asked if voters would be turned off by PAP's overly critical comments, he replied: "Well, I think it is an important issue and a fairly fundamental one. You want to say you are setting yourself up as an alternate government. You must be at least able to run a town council... We should not keep quiet about it."

It is not only about competence, but also about integrity when choosing MPs, he said.

In the wide-ranging session, the DPM was also asked about WP leader Low Thia Kiang's thinly veiled criticism when he asked if the departure of Transport Minister Lui Tuck Yew was because he "has not been supported by his Cabinet colleagues".

Mr Teo dismissed it as "crocodile tears"

He said: "I think it's very characteristic of Mr Low to squeeze the most political mileage out of anything. I'm sure if his party had contested where Mr Lui stood, he wouldn't be saying nice things about him."

Recognising that the electorate would want opposition voices, he noted that the Constitution provided for nine opposition members in Parliament. He said: "Make sure you vote for a candidate and a party whom you really want to place your future in the hands of. Make sure they're the ones you want to manage your money and your town council."

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— Political analyst Eugene Tan, who warned that this tactic may backfire on the PAP