

# **A man whose 'heart is with Singapore': A look back at Low Thia Khiang's political career with Workers' Party**

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- Mr Low's biggest achievement was establishing 'healthy Opposition presence' in Parliament
- He ran a tight ship, and spoke up on national and municipal issues in Parliament
- On the ground, he was described as down-to-earth and empathic
- He has earned the respect of some PAP politicians who said his heart is for the country

During the 2011 General Election (GE), former Workers' Party (WP) chief Low Thia Khiang made the bold move to venture out of the party's traditional stronghold in Hougang, and into the Aljunied Group Representation Constituency (GRC).

The gamble paid off, and it was a watershed year for Singapore's political landscape.

Not only was it the first time an opposition party had won a GRC, but Mr Low and his comrades had wrested control of the constituency from a People's Action Party (PAP) team led by several heavyweights, including ex-foreign minister George Yeo.

Close to a decade later, the party announced on Thursday (June 25) that Mr Low, who has also become synonymous with the party, would no longer be running in the coming election.

Looking back on Mr Low's career, both political observers and those who have worked with him spoke of an individual who not only brought credibility to his party, but remained humble as well.

While Mr Low declined an interview with TODAY, the 63-year-old told CNA that his decision to step down as an MP was "a logical conclusion" that would help renew the party.

The veteran politician has been with Singapore's largest opposition party for 38 years, out of which he spent 29 years as an elected MP.

Political commentator Eugene Tan, a law lecturer at the Singapore Management University, said one does not become the longest-serving opposition MP "just like that".

Since Mr Low took the helm from the late opposition icon J B Jeyaretnam in 2001, he has made WP one of the leading political parties today by making sure it was represented in Parliament, said Associate Professor Tan.

"That was truly significant," he said. "I think when you look at his contribution... his biggest achievement was creating the idea that there is a role, even in a one-dominant-party system, for healthy Opposition presence."

Assoc Prof Tan added that the WP's success in retaining Aljunied GRC in 2015 proved that its earlier victory in 2011 was "no fluke".

It also showed that WP has what it takes to be a proper political party.

"But that required a tight ship and no one can disagree that Mr Low ran a tight ship," said Associate Professor Tan.

WP member Yee Jenn Jong, who was a Non-Constituency MP in 2011 and is contesting an election for the third time, described Mr Low in a Facebook post as a “strict disciplinarian, not afraid to tell you off when there is a need to”. Mr Yee declined requests for an interview.

Aside from his role as a party leader, Mr Low was also a parliamentarian who spoke up on a range of national and municipal issues.

These included topics on immigration policies, protection for those with mental illnesses, lift breakdowns and education in Singapore.

Mr Bernard Chen, who assisted Mr Low as a legislative assistant in WP from 2010 to 2012, said that one of his ex-boss’ pet issues was the “streaming of students according to their capabilities”.

In the WP documentary, *Walking With Singapore: Road to 2011*, Mr Low spoke passionately of his time as a secondary school teacher when the streaming policy was introduced in the 1980s.

“I see my students, I know they are not... slow learners,” said Mr Low as he became emotional. “But because of the system, they will fail.”

After about four decades since streaming was introduced, the Ministry of Education (MOE) will replace it with full subject-based banding in 2024.

Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director for research at the Institute of Policy Studies, a Singapore-based think-tank, said the WP under Mr Low presented alternative views in various policy domains over the years.

The party’s next challenge, she said, will be how to run a town council smoothly if it is re-elected.

## **CAREER BUMPS**

Mr Low has been embroiled in the long-running Aljunied-Hougang Town Council (AHTC) saga which started around 2013 and involves a multi-million-dollar civil lawsuit over financial management lapses at the WP-run town council.

Mr Low and party chairman Sylvia Lim are challenging the decision of the High Court, which ruled in 2019 that they were liable for damages which could reach up to S\$33.7 million.

Another incident that could have contributed to Mr Low’s decision to step down is the recent head injury from a fall in May this year, which put him in hospital for three weeks.

That period saw an outpouring of care and concern from Mr Low’s supporters for his well-being — a testament to his popularity.

Residents of Aljunied GRC TODAY spoke to described Mr Low as a down-to-earth man who was not only helpful, but could empathise with them.

One resident who has been living in Hougang Avenue 6 for 10 years said Mr Low used to “knock every door” at her block about three or four times a year to ask how they were, and what could be improved.

“Not every MP does that,” said the 45-year-old secretary who wanted to be known only as Ms Loh.

Mr Tee Chin Poh, who runs a locksmith shop in Bedok Reservoir, similarly described Mr Low as a humble man who would come by once or twice a month on his bicycle to greet people and ask if anyone needed help.

“He is very down-to-earth and he really does his best to help people,” said the 84-year-old. “He will also pop by to visit bereaved families whenever there are funerals.”

### **‘HEART FOR SINGAPOREANS’**

Mr Low had also earned the respect of members and supporters of the opposing camp as well.

One Bedok North hawker in his 60s, who declined to be named, said he noticed that the area has been “very well run” under the WP.

He added: “I am a PAP supporter, but I know that Mr Low is a talented politician. He always wanted to contribute to the country and has always loved doing his part. Our country is a result of everyone’s effort.”

Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong wrote in a Facebook post on Sunday that aside from believing in political succession and “knowing when to retire”, he also had compatible goals with Mr Low.

“I was for a ‘kinder and gentler’ Singapore, and he was for a ‘constructive and moderate’ opposition,” said Mr Goh, who would not be standing in the coming GE.

“I wish Thia Kiang all the best... Both of us have more to contribute to Singapore outside of Parliament.”

Speaker of Parliament Tan Chuan-Jin said that he appreciated his informal encounters with Mr Low.

When news of Mr Low’s retirement was made official, Mr Tan put up a Facebook post, thanking Mr Low for his many years of service and friendship.

Mr Tan told TODAY that he respected Mr Low “not just as an opposition leader, but as a person”.

“When I became the Speaker, I had a bak kut teh (pork rib soup) lunch with him and we had a very good discussion on a wide range of topics,” recalled Mr Tan.

It was such moments with Mr Low, where they talked about anything from national and regional issues to just “social stuff” that Mr Tan said he valued the most.

“I think we get along,” said Mr Tan. “I enjoy my time with him, talking to him. And he’s quite open about sharing his views and thoughts.”

In his post, Mr Tan wrote: “We may be from different political sides and hold opposing views about issues, but I do know that we actually share many things in common.

“For one, I know that your heart is with Singapore and Singaporeans.”

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY NABILAH AWANG, LENA LOKE AND LORAINÉ LEE