

The Year in Review: Policy and Political Developments in 2014

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INTRODUCTION

The Year in Review 2014 documents the changes in public policy, political developments and cases of civic activism in the year.

The Singapore economy grew at a slower pace in 2014 than in the previous year. The Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) announced on 2 January 2015 that based on advance estimates, the economy grew 2.8% in 2014, compared to 3.7% in 2013.¹ MTI also forecast growth of between 2.0%–4.0% for 2015.

The seasonally-adjusted unemployment rate for the third quarter of 2014 was estimated at 2.9% for residents and 2.8% for Singapore citizens, compared to 2.6% and 2.8%, respectively, for the same quarter of 2013.²

The Gini coefficient for Singapore, reported in February 2014 for the previous 12 months and which measures income inequality, fell from 0.478 in 2012 to 0.463 in 2013, a nine-year low, suggesting that efforts to temper the income divide were working. The top income decile suffered a 5.2% cut in real income while the bottom income decile saw its real income rise by 2.4%. After accounting for the effect of income re-distribution through taxes and government transfers, the Gini coefficient fell from 0.463 in 2012 to 0.412 in 2013.³

CHANGES IN PUBLIC POLICIES

Education

The Applied Study in Polytechnics and ITE Review (Aspire)

2014 began with a renewed focus on education and skills training as being integral to Singapore's economic restructuring. The government has tried to ensure that there is a system that produces workers with employable skills that are relevant to the changing economy. To facilitate this, the Aspire committee was set up in January 2014 and chaired by Senior Minister of State for Law and Education, Indranee Rajah. The overall team was 98-strong and consisted of a steering committee, an engagement committee, and three review committees. It included figures from business, industry and the education sector, including principals of local polytechnics, heads of local enterprises, and prominent officials from the Ministry of Education (MOE).⁴

Ms Indranee stated that the goals of Aspire were to look at how to “ensure that polytechnic and ITE students will continue to be well equipped for work and life, even as the operating environment evolves.” She added, “we also want to avoid a mismatch between industry needs and student qualifications, skills and capabilities.”⁵

Over the course of the year, Aspire conducted various activities such as town hall meetings with students, focus group sessions with ITE and polytechnic staff, as well as study trips to countries such as Germany, Switzerland, Australia and New Zealand to understand how their vocational training systems function. The committee reached out to about 12,000 polytechnic students, 5,000 ITE students, 3,000 parents and alumni, and almost 400 polytechnic and ITE staff⁶; a thorough consultation of all stakeholders.

Following these activities, the committee released its recommendations in August 2014. Its 10 recommendations can be divided into three major categories — better choices, deeper skills and multiple paths. These included the recommendation that new career guidance programmes be developed for polytechnics and ITEs, as well as for the enhancement of internships and apprenticeships to improve the work experience of students. Minister for Education Heng Swee Keat accepted all the recommendations on the behalf of the government a day later. He noted the “significant shifts” underpinning the committee's proposals, and agreed that multiple pathways in the course of study and work should be encouraged.⁷ Members of Parliament welcomed the proposals although some pointed out that a change in the public mindset would be essential for the recommendations to succeed.⁸

Prime Minister (PM) Lee Hsien Loong backed the work of the Aspire committee during the National Day Rally, outlining a vision of Singapore where people would be given opportunities to fulfil their full potential, regardless of educational qualifications. He said that the Public Service would do its part by giving more weight to job performance and skills instead of starting qualifications in the career development of its officers, and announced the setting up of a new tripartite committee to help ITE and polytechnic graduates get the right jobs and move up the ladder.⁹

The public was generally encouraged by the announcement, agreeing that it was a step in the right direction.¹⁰ However, some wondered if this meant that university degrees were no longer important. In response, Minister Heng stressed that the purpose of Aspire was to open pathways for all, not to block pathways for some. University degrees would remain important for some jobs, but others would place more emphasis on skills that would be better acquired on the job.¹¹

Housing

Cooling the property resale market

The general issue of cost of living and specifically, the question of the affordable housing continued to be in the spotlight in 2014. Adding to the eight property cooling measures introduced from 2009 to 2013, National Development Minister Khaw Boon Wan announced in March 2014 that cash-over-valuation (COV) figures would no longer be part of the negotiating process for Housing Development Board (HDB) resale transactions. Buyers and sellers would instead have to agree on a price before getting an official valuation. Minister Khaw stated that the move was to restore the original intention of valuation, which was to help buyers get a housing loan.¹²

The measures introduced to moderate the price of housing and the state of the property market in general, had their intended effect. In November 2014, prices in the private housing market had declined by nearly 4% since the fourth quarter of 2013, going down for four consecutive quarters.¹³ The resale market for HDB flats also saw a similar trend, with prices declining for five consecutive quarters and eight consecutive months till October 2014. Compared with October 2013, resale prices were 6% lower; they were also 9% lower when compared with their peak in April 2013.¹⁴

Despite these falls, the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) released data in November 2014, suggesting that private property prices were still elevated. The MAS statement noted that despite the sustained decline, house prices had risen by 62% between the second quarter of 2009 and the third quarter of 2013 so the measures had barely shaved off those increases from the past. "The property measures have also contributed to restoring financial prudence, but the prospect of higher interest rates remains a risk for some highly leveraged households," MAS said in its annual *Financial Stability Review*. This came a day after Chia Boon Kuah, President of the Real Estate Developers' Association of Singapore, urged the government to stand ready to take supportive measures to prevent the housing market from tipping over amid steady declines.¹⁵ Minister Khaw had earlier explained that the cooling measures were intended to keep the market stable and sustainable, encouraging financial prudence among homebuyers and ensuring that they were not over-leveraged.¹⁶

Improvements in affordability for first-time buyers

For first-time buyers, Minister Khaw announced in November 2014 that new HDB flats had become more affordable relative to applicants' median household incomes. Statistics showed that price ratios relative to income had fallen across all categories of flats, which cost approximately 5.5 times the annual salary of applicants in 2013. However, the target set in 2013 was to bring flat prices down to four times the annual salary of applicants, which had yet to be achieved at the time of the writing of this report.¹⁷

It was also announced that the government would continue to reduce the number of Build-to-Order (BTO) flats by 25% in 2015, extending the tapering that saw 10% less BTO flats launched in 2014 compared with 2013.¹⁸ Minister Khaw explained on his official “Housing Matters” blog that this reduction was based on “recent BTO application rates”, as there were now fewer applicants per BTO flat available, meaning that the backlog of demand had been cleared. The year 2015 would see four quarterly BTO exercises with a launch size of approximately 4,000 units each, for a total of about 16,000 units.¹⁹

Addressing cash-flow difficulties when downsizing flats

Starting from the September 2014 BTO exercise, existing HDB owners who bought two- or three-room flats in non-mature estates are now allowed to pay only half the required downpayment up front, and the rest, later. The HDB said in a statement that this would help owners looking to “right-size” their flat but had funds tied up in their current property, causing them to be unable to make the initial downpayment. Minister Khaw revealed that 47 elderly applicants had to cancel their flat bookings in 2013 because of such cash-flow issues, and this measure would help address the problem.²⁰

Giving more help to families whose members wish to live near each other

The HDB implemented an enhanced Married Child Priority Scheme in November 2014, which allows up to 30% of BTO and Sale of Balance (SBF) flats to go to first-timer families. The scheme also gives first priority to two groups of applicants — parents and married children who apply to live together under one roof, as well as parents who own a flat in a mature estate and apply for a BTO flat near their married children in a non-mature estate. The HDB added that scheme applicants make up about one quarter of flat bookings at each exercise and that this enhancement will offer them “significantly higher chances of success” — an improvement from the previous scheme where families who wanted to live with or near each other received extra ballot chances for new flat applications.²¹

Expansion of the Parenthood Provisional Housing Scheme (PPHS)

The PPHS began in January 2013 with 1,150 flats available for first-timer married couples with children younger than 16 to rent a flat from HDB, while waiting for their BTO flats to be built. In November 2014, Minister Khaw announced that 800 additional temporary flats would be available to couples in 2015. The scheme also added the option for couples to co-rent PPHS flats so as to share the rental costs and the flat with another family.²²

Population Growth in 2014

The growth in Singapore’s total population tapered to 1.3% for a figure of 5.47 million, down from 1.63% in 2013 — the slowest since 2004. The total fertility rate (TFR) was 1.19 for 2014, down from 1.29 in 2013. The lower growth was a result of “concrete steps taken to slow the growth of our foreign workforce to a more sustainable pace”, with foreign employment growth slowing to 3%, down from 5.9% in the previous year. Those aged 65 and above formed 12.4% of the citizen population, up from 11.7%.²³

Budget 2014

Budget 2014 was titled “Opportunities for the Future, Assurance for Our Seniors”. It focused on measures that would ease the process of economic restructuring by improving productivity and fostering innovation while the rate of foreign workforce growth is trimmed. The Budget also aimed to promote social mobility, reduce income inequality and improve the well-being of vulnerable groups. The ‘star’ of the Budget in that respect was the Pioneer Generation Package, a fully-funded programme to help senior Singaporeans with their healthcare costs.

The first pillar of the Budget — “Transforming our Economy” — further enhanced the Productivity and Wage Credit Scheme (PIC) first introduced in 2013, by extending it for another three years, and introduced PIC+ for qualifying SMEs. It also rolled out an Infocomm Technology and Growth Programme (IPG); added \$500 million to the Lifelong Learning Endowment Fund to support continuing education and training; and implemented tax incentives for innovation and financing for the growth and internationalisation of local firms. Levies for foreign workers were again raised as part of a progressive plan to reduce dependency on foreign labour, and requirements for S Pass and Employment Pass holders were tightened.

The second pillar of the Budget — “A Fair and Equitable Society” — committed to increasing the availability and affordability of childcare by building more centres; extending more support to pre-schools to raise their quality; and increasing access to bursaries and financial assistance to local households. To aid retirement adequacy and healthcare, the government also implemented two programmes as add-ons to existing ones: CPF LIFE and MediShield Life. CPF LIFE was designed to improve the current CPF system, by providing all members with a monthly lifelong payout upon reaching draw-down age, and improving upon the 20-year payout period under the current Minimum Sum scheme. Two Plans were implemented for members to choose from — one having higher monthly payouts and a lower bequest, while the other would have lower monthly payouts and a higher bequest. It was also announced that MediShield Life would be implemented from end-2015, replacing MediShield. More details of MediShield Life will be discussed under the Health section later.

The final pillar of the Budget was the Pioneer Generation Package (PGP), which included various measures to provide the Pioneer Generation (defined as those who were at least 16 years old in 1965 and obtained citizenship before 1 Jan 1987), totalling around 450,000 Singaporeans. PGP recipients would benefit from annual Medisave top-ups starting from July 2014; receive special subsidies to MediShield Life premiums starting from 40% at age 65 and rising to 60% at age 90; and gain an additional 50% subsidy to bills at Specialist Outpatient Clinics, with enhanced benefits under the Community Health Assistance Scheme and Disability Assistance for those with moderate to severe functional disabilities. Pioneer Generation members would also have their MediShield Life premiums covered partially or fully, depending on their age, with \$9 billion being set aside for this fully-funded measure.

Also announced were improvements to public transportation, with the setting up of a Bus Service Enhancement Programme and a concerted effort to increase the number of MRT trains by more than 100 to reduce waiting time and ease crowding.

Reactions to Budget 2014

The PGP was well received by most, including members of the opposition parties. Chairman of the Worker's Party (WP) and MP Sylvia Lim remarked in Parliament that the PGP was a "refreshing departure from public conversations of the past... we are recognising the contributions of everyone else on equal footing, from followers to mothers and labourers."²⁴ The WP and National Solidarity Party took the opportunity to highlight that they had previously called for the government to do more for the elderly, with the former adding that recognising the contributions of seniors was "long overdue."²⁵ The Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) meanwhile argued that while the PGP was welcomed, it did not "go far enough to enable our elderly to survive in retirement" and "does not address the wider problem of those in need."²⁶

WP member and Non-Constituency MP Gerald Giam also noted that "there is still much that needs to be done for the elderly and future elderly in Singapore, especially people with disabilities, homemakers and low-income workers who will have insufficient savings when they reach retirement age."²⁷ MPs suggested various improvements to the PGP, such as issuing "Pioneer Generation" cards to easily identify beneficiaries, giving additional help to those with special needs or disabilities, and giving seniors additional privileges.²⁸

Questions were raised on the economic restructuring measures in the Budget. MPs from the business sector argued that moves to raise productivity, restrict foreign labour supply, and increase wages could place unbearable pressure on local businesses, forcing them to either relocate overseas or shut down completely.²⁹ Productivity-wise, MPs called for more help for local SMEs, encouraging them to take advantage of the measures available to move up the value chain.³⁰ Responding to MPs who highlighted the lack of tangible results from the productivity drive, Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) and Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam explained that Singapore had actually closed the productivity gap over the years and had done so while maintaining full employment — going from 40% of US productivity in 1980 to 70% in 2013. He added that the government would act to boost labour supply and step in to help businesses mitigate costs should it see the market heating up.³¹

Wrapping up the Budget debate, DPM Tharman highlighted that one of Singapore's major future fiscal challenges would be controlling spending on healthcare, with the healthcare budget being projected to rise to \$8 billion in 2015 and \$12 billion by 2020, and the ageing population likely to contribute to rising costs. He stressed the importance of rebalancing the healthcare system to place greater emphasis on primary and community care, and cautioned against the trap of believing that the quality of healthcare by the government spending more on it.³²

Healthcare*MediShield Life*

MediShield Life was announced during Budget 2014 as an enhancement of MediShield, which would be implemented at end-2015. The goal of MediShield Life was to provide better protection against large hospital bills and expensive chronic treatments, especially in light of Singapore's ageing population.

After months of discussion and dialogue, the MediShield Life Review Committee released its recommendations in June 2014. These included higher claim limits for patients for ward charges and surgical procedures as well as higher lifetime claim limits. Furthermore, MediShield Life would extend universal lifetime coverage to all Singapore citizens and PRs, covering all pre-existing conditions and improve the efficacy of Integrated Shield Plans. As MediShield Life necessitated higher monthly premiums, permanent premium subsidies were suggested for low- to middle-income households to defray the cost. Additional subsidies, it was also suggested, should be awarded to the elderly. Under the PGP, pioneers would also receive substantial to full subsidies for their premium payments. The government accepted all the recommendations of the committee, adding \$4 billion in financial support to help keep MediShield Life affordable.³³

MPs were largely supportive of the scheme, but raised concern over the long-term sustainability of the system and rising premiums. PM Lee stated that the government would ensure that affordability “should never be an issue” for payment of the higher premiums. Minister Gan also said that the Ministry of Health (MOH) would keep a close eye on premiums and “ensure that overall healthcare cost is managed properly.”³⁴ The government announced in the Budget that employers’ contributions to the Central Provident Fund (CPF) accounts of their employees would be raised by 1% in 2015 in order to boost their Medisave funds, which would in turn help most people fully cover the additional premiums with no out-of-pocket expenses.

Tackling the hospital bed crunch

January 2014 saw a severe bed crunch in Singapore hospitals, with three major hospitals — Changi General Hospital, Tan Tock Seng Hospital and Khoo Teck Puat Hospital — forced to set up additional beds or move patients to other hospitals. Bed occupancy rates reached 100% and waiting times for inpatient beds exceeded 24 hours in some hospitals.³⁵ Health Minister Gan Kim Yong acknowledged the problem and the importance of ramping up capacity, stating that the government was in the process of building more hospitals, adding 1,200 beds later in the year. Additionally, 1,900 more acute hospital beds and 2,600 more community hospital beds would be available by 2020. Both Minister Gan and Chief Executive of Jurong Health Services Foo Hee Jug stressed the necessity of setting up a better care network, shifting the burden of care away from hospitals towards community and primary healthcare providers.³⁶ The Home Care Development Plan was expanded to continue investment in home-based care services, extending subsidies to home-based rehabilitation services and home environment assessment services. The government also launched a set of Home Care Guidelines for public and industry consultation.

WP Secretary-General and MP Low Thia Kiang criticised the bed crunch in Parliament in March 2014, saying that it was an example of Third World problems in First World Singapore. He argued that the problem had become severe enough to “warrant MOH to take a hard look.” People’s Action Party (PAP) MP and Chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Health Lam Pin Min followed suit, saying that the problem “points to the fact that we have not effectively deployed our resources and ensured right siting of care.” Minister Gan explained that building capacity had been a key focus of Singapore’s healthcare policy. He pointed out that from 2003 to 2013, beds in public acute and community hospitals as well as in nursing homes increased by over 30%. Hospitals

were also taking steps to raise short-term capacity, and the Health 2020 Masterplan also laid out moves to further meet long-term needs.³⁷

CPF and Retirement Adequacy

Continuing on the topic of the needs of an ageing population, the government announced that the CPF Minimum Sum would be raised to \$155,000 in 2014 from \$148,000 in 2013, as part of an effort from 2003 to ensure that there would be sufficient funds of up to \$120,000 in 2003 dollars to fund the retirement income of Singaporeans. PM Lee also announced at the 2014 National Day Rally in August that the amount would increase to \$161,000 in 2015, but this would mark the final instalment of these increases. However, the PM also cautioned that the Minimum Sum would still need to be adjusted from time to time to keep pace with rising income and spending needs, and a longer retirement as longevity increased among Singaporeans.³⁸

The continued raising of the Minimum Sum caused the CPF to come under intense scrutiny, with observers questioning the necessity of doing so. On his official blog, Manpower Minister Tan Chuan-Jin sought to address the unhappiness over the increase in May 2014, explaining that rising longevity, greater needs and rising costs meant that the previous amounts would no longer be sufficient to provide for retirement. He also attempted to clarify misconceptions over the Minimum Sum, noting that nearly half of CPF members met the Minimum Sum in 2013, up from one-third in 2008. He concluded that the CPF was a “good system and a fair one... more sustainable than most other retirement schemes.”³⁹

Questions were also raised regarding CPF interest rates and the returns on CPF monies. In two separate letters to *TODAY*, readers Fang Shouyi and Lawrence Seow advocated raising the CPF interest rates to keep up with inflation, as this would help with retirement income adequacy.⁴⁰ Others questioned how the investments of CPF monies were conducted. A “Return Our CPF” protest was organised at Hong Lim Park in early June, drawing a large crowd. Speakers at the protest criticised what they perceived as a lack of transparency in the CPF scheme, its low rate of returns when compared to the long-term rates of return to the country’s sovereign wealth funds which they thought managed CPF monies and the unclear links therefore between various government agencies such as GIC, Temasek Holdings and the CPF Board.⁴¹ (More about “Return Our CPF” and blogger Roy Ngerng will be referred to under the Civic Activism section.)

Responding to these criticisms, DPM Tharman defended the CPF system in Parliament in July, saying that it was internationally recognised as a robust and sustainable system. He also explained that the CPF system had protected members from risk and compared favourably with other pension funds, as few other funds in the world had guaranteed annual returns made by the government, that the CPF was providing. The government had absorbed market volatility over the years (taking losses in eight out of 20 years) to ensure that CPF members were able to receive promised interest returns. CPF monies were not invested by Temasek, but into Special Singapore Government Securities (SSGS), which were issued specially by the government to the CPF Board and held a triple-A credit rating, reflecting Singapore’s strong financial position and thus ensuring that the CPF would not fail to make its obligations to members. Furthermore, DPM Tharman said that “the SSGS

proceeds are not passed to Temasek [Holdings] for management. Temasek manages its own assets, and does not manage any CPF monies.”⁴²

Nonetheless, MPs called for a holistic review of the CPF system in Parliament, suggesting that the ways in which CPF monies were invested could be refined or modified to improve returns for members.⁴³ Minister Tan Chuan-Jin agreed, saying that the government was looking into ways in which this could be done.⁴⁴ The Ministry of Manpower subsequently announced the setting up of a 13-member CPF Advisory Panel consisting of academics, financial industry experts and representatives from unions and the grassroots and social sectors.⁴⁵

The panel aimed to study specific areas where the CPF could be improved, including: how the Minimum Sum should be adjusted beyond 2015; how to enable members to withdraw more as a lump sum upon retirement; how to provide an more options for members in terms of payout to help with rising costs of living; and how to provide flexibility for members to seek higher returns and/or invest in private annuities. The panel was scheduled to hold focus group discussions with members of the public from November 2014. Initial recommendations would be due in early 2015, with the study completed by September 2015.⁴⁶

Social Policies

Continued rollout of Social Service Offices (SSOs)

As part of Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) efforts to better coordinate social assistance, SSOs were announced in 2013, with four centres established in the year. MSF planned to create a network of 20 such offices in Singapore. MSF Minister Chan Chun Sing announced in July 2014 that the target number had been increased to 23 (and later 24 with a centre in Ang Mo Kio), all of which would be operational by June 2015.⁴⁷ The SSOs would partner with local voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) and community partners in the area.

The SSOs formed part of a network to help needy residents, and would have first dibs on the national database of aid recipients, which would be ready in 2015. They would help manage cases and have access to each beneficiary’s case history and the different places they have sought help from, eliminating the need to repeat personal details to every agency.⁴⁸ Schemes designed included job placement and financial assistance for the needy.

Defence

The Committee to Strengthen National Service (CSNS)

The CSNS was set up in March 2013 to examine how the National Service (NS) system could be strengthened in the future for Singapore and Singaporeans. It released its recommendations in May 2014, following various public consultations, town hall meetings, and surveys.

The recommendations were, broadly, to strengthen the NS Training System by employing more regular servicemen; to give more opportunities for National Servicemen to contribute; to raise the recognition and benefits for National Servicemen; to expand community support for National Servicemen; and to ease administrative restrictions for NS. Notable changes

included the setting up of an SAF Volunteer Corps, which would allow women and first-generation Permanent Residents (PRs) to serve on a voluntary basis; increased incentives for NSMen to pass their Individual Physical Proficiency Test and complete reservist cycles; as well as for full-time National Servicemen to enjoy shorter waiting times before enlistment and the possible ability for them to choose their own vocations.

All the recommendations by the committee were accepted by the government. PM Lee said that the proposed changes would “strengthen NS (National Service) for future generations and ensure the defence, safety and security of Singapore.”⁴⁹ Reactions from the public were mixed; local blogger Kwan Jin Yao praised the report as “good” and the measures as “well-intentioned” but noted that larger issues such as the duration of NS and perceived race and gender discrimination were left out.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, Daniel Yap commented on local blog “Five Stars and A Moon” that “the CSNS may have built up the positives, but it did nothing to tackle the negatives”⁵¹ — referring to issues such as uninformed criticism of servicemen and the calls for PRs to serve full-time NS.

Home Affairs and Security

The Public Order (Temporary Measures) Act in Little India

Following the Little India riot in December 2013, the government invoked the Public Order (Preservation) Act in that area, designating it as one that was in a state of danger to public order during weekends, public holidays and eves of public holidays. Twenty-five foreign workers were charged with instigating the riot, 57 others were repatriated, and 213 more were issued formal police advisories but allowed to continue to work and live in Singapore. A Committee of Inquiry (COI) was also convened to look into the incident, which will be covered in more detail under the later section on “Political Developments”.

Under the Public Order (Preservation) Act, restrictions were imposed on public gatherings and the sale of alcohol. It also granted the police wide-ranging powers to impose curfews, take control of property, and authorise force on those who resisted arrest. On 20 January, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Home Affairs Teo Chee Hean announced that the government would introduce the Public Order (Temporary Measures) Bill, which empowered authorities to continue with “calibrated measures” that were “scoped tightly” at maintaining public order in Little India, rather than the wide-ranging restrictions under the Public Order (Preservation) Act.⁵²

The Public Order (Temporary Measures) Act, which would last a year, proposed giving police additional powers to “maintain public peace”, including the authority to search individuals for alcohol and the ability to exclude or compel people to leave Little India. The Bill was debated in Parliament, with mixed reactions from MPs. While some MPs supported the measures, others expressed unease, calling the Bill unnecessary and questioning the assumption that alcohol was an underlying cause of the riot. The WP opposed the Bill, questioning how auxiliary security officers would use their powers and raising the possibility of discrimination towards foreign workers by improperly trained personnel.⁵³

Civil society activists also questioned the Bill. Five activists, including blogger Andrew Loh and filmmaker Lynn Lee, submitted a Briefing Paper on the Bill to the Speaker of Parliament. The Paper outlined concerns about how the Bill would set precedents for future law and

order considerations, and noted that many activists felt “uneasy about the wide powers given to the government under the Bill.”⁵⁴ Blogger Kirsten Han likewise argued that the proposed measures could exacerbate problems instead of address them, and make migrant workers feel even less respected.⁵⁵ Concerns were also raised about how the Bill would affect businesses in the area.

After the debate, the Bill was passed on 18 February with majority support; however, Opposition and Nominated Members of Parliament (NMPs) opposed the Bill. The law officially came into effect on 1 April 2014, and was due to expire on 31 March 2015. In December 2014, MP Denise Phua, whose ward included part of Little India, said that residents there had been vocal in calling for the temporary measures to remain in place. Residents cited reduced instances of drunken, rowdy and undesirable behaviour from foreign workers as reasons, and Ms Phua called upon the authorities to “give more weightage to the needs of residents” and honour their wishes.⁵⁶

Arts & Media

Withdrawal of the proposed Arts Self-Classification and Term Licensing Scheme

In February 2014, Minister for Communications and Information Dr Yaacob Ibrahim proposed that a self-classification scheme that allowed arts groups to declare a public rating of their work be piloted in the second quarter of 2014. Participating arts groups would be issued Tier 1 or 2 licences instead of referring to the Media Development Authority (MDA) for a license to perform their work. Tier 1 licences allowed the classification of General-rated performances (other than those involving race, religion or politics), while Tier 2 licences allowed for the classification of all performances up to R18. Only groups showing a good track record with MDA regulations and running regular shows would be issued a Tier 2 licence,⁵⁷ and penalties would be handed out to groups deemed to have misclassified shows or performances.

The scheme was slated to launch in July but many artists argued that the scheme would pass the responsibility of censorship from the MDA to the artist, effectively encouraging self-censorship. Arts Engage, a network of more than 200 arts practitioners, including many prominent Singaporean ones, published a position paper on its website heavily criticising the scheme and urging artists to reject it. The position paper was backed by 45 arts groups, including prominent groups such as the Singapore Dance Theatre and Singapore Repertory Theatre.⁵⁸ A YouTube video⁵⁹ featuring artists explaining why they rejected the proposal was also released and garnered more than 10,000 views.

In August 2014, the MDA announced that it would remove the term licensing scheme from its proposed amendments to the Public Entertainment and Meetings Act. MDA CEO Koh Lin-Net said, “We appreciate the very useful dialogues we had with Arts Engage, where we identified areas where we could work even better together. However... we realised that it was not a matter of whether or not the scheme could have been better designed. Rather... there were fundamental differences in views which could not be resolved.”⁶⁰

The National Library Board (NLB) and “Penguin-gate”

On 9 July 2014, it was reported that the National Library Board (NLB) had taken two children’s books off its shelves after receiving complaints that the books were not “pro-family”. A Facebook user, Teo Kai Loon, posted in the open Facebook group “We Are Against Pinkdot in Singapore” that NLB had removed the books following his complaint. The books were *And Tango Makes Three*, which featured two male penguins as a couple successfully raising a young penguin, and *The White Swan Express*, which was about adoption and featured a single mother and lesbian couple in its cast of characters. It was revealed that NLB had also previously removed a third book, *Who’s in My Family? All About Our Family*, which included references to single parents and same-sex couples.⁶¹

The move attracted criticism from many civil society groups. Civic activist and former SDP member Dr Vincent Wijeyasingha called the case “a really serious matter of public censorship”. The Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) also questioned the definition of “family”, noting that being pro-family also meant understanding that many family types do exist. Critics wondered if the NLB had acted on the complaints of a small group. On the other hand, others supported the removal, with the Facebook group “Singaporeans United for Family” writing a letter expressing support for the removal.

NLB announced on 11 July that the titles would not be reinstated and would be “pulped” in accordance with library policy.⁶² NLB defended its book review process, saying it continually reviewed books and its librarians had a “sensing of the needs and concerns of the community that they serve at the library.”⁶³ Dr Yaacob defended NLB, saying in a Facebook post that it was guided by community norms when considering whether to withdraw the books.

The announcement of book destruction sparked a public outcry. Local writers including Gwee Li Sui, Suchen Christine Lim, Adrian Tan and Ovidia Yu added to the criticism and pulled out of NLB-related events to protest against the Board’s actions. Three judges of the Singapore Literature Prize resigned from their positions, releasing a strongly-worded statement condemning both the hasty removal of the books and the intended pulping. A book-reading event featuring the banned books was approved for 13 July at the National Library atrium, and attracted approximately 400 people.⁶⁴

On 19 July, Dr Yaacob said that NLB had been instructed to return the two most recently banned titles to library shelves — albeit in the adult section. The library was also to undertake a review of its internal processes of handling books, particularly those receiving negative feedback from the public. NLB CEO Elaine Ng acknowledged that this was in response to the outcry, and said that destroying books withdrawn from circulation was “something we could have thought deeper about.”⁶⁵

The move was both welcomed and criticised by the public: while some felt it was a reasonable compromise, others felt that the books should not be placed in the adult section, and yet others believed that the NLB should not reverse its decision.⁶⁶ This saga raised questions regarding who should hold sway over decisions involving possible community norms, and whose norms should ultimately prevail. IPS Research Fellow Carol Soon argued that promoting learning and literacy should be the function of libraries, rather than “moral policing”.

To Singapore, With Love rated as “Not Allowed for All Ratings”

On 10 September, MDA announced that local filmmaker Tan Pin Pin’s latest work *To Singapore, With Love* would be classified as “Not Allowed for All Ratings (NAR).” The NAR classification meant that the film was not permitted to be screened at public gatherings or distributed in Singapore, though “purely private” screenings would be permitted. *To Singapore, With Love* featured interviews with self-professed exiles from Singapore, including members or supporters of the now-defunct Communist Party of Malaya (CPM). It had won Ms Tan multiple awards, including Best Director at the Muhr Asia Africa Documentary Awards at the Dubai International Film Festival 2013.⁶⁷

The MDA explained its decision by saying that the film’s contents “undermine national security because legitimate actions of security agencies to protect national security and stability of Singapore are presented in a distorted way as acts that victimised innocent individuals.” Dr Yaacob supported the MDA’s actions, saying in a statement that the exiles “should not enjoy a public platform to purvey distorted and untruthful accounts to mislead the public, absolve themselves or deny their past actions.”⁶⁸

Ms Tan and many Singaporean artists expressed disappointment at the rating. A statement was released by a group of 39 artists — including filmmaker Anthony Chen and Cultural Medallion winners Ivan Heng, T. Sasitharan and Ong Keng Sen — urging the MDA and government to reconsider its decision, and further suggesting that “rather than banning the documentary, authorities release their version of the events in question, so that viewers can make up their own minds.”⁶⁹ An online petition was also created to appeal against the decision, which was signed by more than 1,000 people.⁷⁰ In a letter to *TODAY* on 13 September, reader Han Ming Guang urged the MDA to change the rating, asking for “faith in Singaporeans’ ability to discern what information is useful and what is not, and to debate civilly and openly among themselves.”

A screening of *To Singapore, With Love* was subsequently organised at a Johor Baru hotel on 19 September, which drew a crowd of more than 400 people. Ms Tan was present at the screening, and took questions from the audience.⁷¹ On 30 September, Ms Tan re-submitted the film to the MDA appealing for classification, with the content of the film remaining unchanged.

At the National University of Singapore Society (NUSS) lecture on 3 October, PM Lee further explained the government’s stance on the film. He called it “a self-serving personal account, conveniently inaccurate in places” and added that “you watch the movie, you think it’s a documentary, it may be... very convincing but it’s not a documentary.” He also touched on the historical context of the conflict between communists and non-communists, saying that it was an armed, violent struggle for power and a matter of historical record.

On 11 November, the Films Appeal Committee (FAC) upheld the MDA’s decision, keeping the film classified as NAR. The committee released a statement saying it “found the film to be a one-sided account with minimal attempts to provide a balanced mix of views” and that “the film would pose a serious risk to Singapore’s national security by condoning the use of violence and subversion as a means to achieve political ends in Singapore.” The Singapore government also mounted an exhibition on the “Battle for Merger”, releasing a compilation of

Mr Lee Kuan Yew's speeches from 1961 to 1962 — in effect, a reminder of the authorities' account of what had happened.

Amendments to Existing Laws

Private member's Bills on human trafficking and animal welfare

Two private member's Bills were proposed this year in Parliament, a rarity as only three had ever been tabled since Independence — the last being the Maintenance of Parents Act in 1994 by then-Nominated MP Walter Woon.⁷²

The first of the 2014 Bills, titled the Prevention of Human Trafficking Bill, was proposed by PAP MP Christopher de Souza who had the green light from the Ministry of Home Affairs in November 2013 to do so. The Bill aimed to tighten and centralise legislation on human trafficking in Singapore, as legislation against trafficking had previously been under different legislation, such as the Women's Charter and the Children and Young Persons Act. Mr de Souza stated that he would hold public consultations to seek feedback on the Bill, and welcomed input from all Singaporeans.⁷³

After eleven months of consultation, the first reading of the Prevention of Human Trafficking Bill was conducted on 7 October in Parliament, and was passed on 3 November.⁷⁴ The Bill set out a formal definition of Trafficking-in-Persons (TIP), as well as related penalties, protections, enforcement powers, and victim support and protection measures.

While non-governmental organisations (NGOs) lauded the effort of Mr de Souza in creating the Bill, they were not completely satisfied with the end result, saying that it focused too much on prevention and prosecution instead of protecting the rights of victims. Nevertheless, executive director of the NGO Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME) Jolovan Wham stated that "continued engagement with the authorities" would help the Bill "evolve to a piece of legislation that will be more comprehensive and uphold the rights of trafficked victims."⁷⁵

The second Bill, announced in February 2014, aimed to toughen animal welfare laws and was titled the Animals and Birds (Amendment) Bill. It was proposed and co-drafted by five PAP MPs: Yeo Guat Kwang, Gan Thiam Poh, Alex Yam, Edwin Tong and Vikram Nair.⁷⁶ The Bill tabled recommendations based on the Animal Welfare Legislation Review Committee, chaired by Mr Yeo chaired and of which the other MPs were a part.

The Animals and Birds (Amendment) Bill was officially tabled in Parliament on 7 October as well, and had its second reading on 4 November. It strengthened existing laws, placing legal responsibilities on owners of animals to take proper care of them and increased the penalties for persons found guilty of animal abuse or mistreatment. The Bill also proposed that employees of animal-related businesses be properly trained, extending from staff in pet shops.⁷⁷ The Bill was passed on 5 November with the government accepting all its recommendations.⁷⁸ MND Minister Khaw Boon Wan praised the Bill as a "big step forward", reflecting a "diversity of perspectives from animal lovers and those who are less comfortable being around animals". He also said that the MPs had made history by passing a private member's Bill related to the MND for the first time.⁷⁹

The tabling of these Bills showed that all MPs, backbenchers included, could still make important contributions to introducing legislation or initiate legislative reform, as opposed to only leaving it to the front bench. The Bills allowed for the advocacy and discussion of issues that were not related to the bread-and-butter issues but those related to social norms and ethics.

Rule changes to civil servants visiting casinos and falling casino revenues

In October 2013, the Public Service Division (PSD) announced that public servants who visited casinos more than four times a month or who had bought an annual entry pass to casinos would need to declare this activity within seven days. In addition, other groups of officers in positions vulnerable to bribery or whose misconduct was deemed to have “significant reputational risk to the Public Service” would be required to declare every casino visit. These changes came in the wake of several high-profile corruption cases, including that of Edwin Yeo, a former assistant director at the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau who was found guilty of misappropriating money to fund his gambling habit.⁸⁰

It was reported in November 2014 that both local casinos were facing drops in revenue due in part to shrinking tourist arrivals from China, with Marina Bay Sands and Resorts World Sentosa reporting falls of more than 30% in VIP volume business — which is mostly Chinese and accounts for approximately half of total gaming revenue — in the third quarter of 2014. China’s slowing economic growth and its ongoing campaign against graft and corruption were cited as reasons for the fall in VIP volume. Ratings agency Fitch however projected that the drop in VIP revenue was temporary and would ease in 2015.⁸¹

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

The Worker's Party's Management of Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council (AHPETC)

The unlicensed fair

On 31 January, the National Environment Agency (NEA) issued a summons to the WP-run AHPETC for holding a Chinese New Year fair in Hougang Central from 9 to 30 January without a valid licence. AHPETC claimed that it had “initiated communications with the NEA over its intention to run the event since Dec 20 last year, with the nature of the community fair and the benefit to residents clearly stated.”⁸² This incident followed after several events in 2013, including a discussion about licensing requirements for trade fairs and Hougang shopkeepers petitioning the AHPETC to stop trade fairs held outside their shops.

At a student forum on 29 January, AHPETC Vice-Chairman and WP MP Pritam Singh had claimed that the incidents were due to the “politicisation of grassroots”, pointing out that many members of People’s Association (PA) grassroots bodies were also members of the ruling PAP. Mr Singh said that the WP lacked large-scale experience in running the town council, but was paying a lot of attention to the matter.⁸³

In response, Victor Lye, chairman of the Bedok Reservoir-Punggol Citizens Consultative Committee and PAP branch, wrote to *The Straits Times* Forum on 3 February, criticising the WP’s handling of the town council. He argued that the AHPETC “repeatedly sacrificed the welfare of hawkers and shopkeepers in Aljunied for its selfish interests... It is Mr Singh and AHPETC who shirked responsibility, dismissed legitimate concerns, and blamed others.”⁸⁴ He expressed puzzlement at why the town council had not applied for licences in a timely manner.

AHPETC Chairman and WP MP Sylvia Lim stated that the town council would defend itself in court against the summons, with the trial starting on 15 October.

At the trial, it emerged that AHPETC had been informed by the NEA in December 2013 that a permit was required by the fair. Following the submission of documents, the NEA informed AHPETC on 9 January 2014 that its application for a permit was incomplete and could not be processed. The next day, the NEA wrote to the town council, warning it to stop the fair until a permit was issued or enforcement action would be taken. However, the town council did not reply and went ahead with the fair.⁸⁵

AHPETC argued that it had done its due diligence by contacting NEA; it found the NEA forms unsuitable as it claimed that the event was a “mini-fair” community event in a common area managed by the town council, thus not requiring a permit. NEA argued that there was no distinction made between small and large fairs, and that the town council had been informed multiple times that the fair flouted regulations but did not shut it down.⁸⁶ Nonetheless, the forms were eventually submitted and the WP team completed them in areas they felt it was reasonable to and left the other areas uncompleted. These papers were rejected with the request to complete them thoroughly. The fair was held in spite of this.

On 28 November 2014, AHPETC was found guilty of holding a fair without a permit. District Judge Victor Yeo said that the AHPETC had not taken “reasonable care” to avoid committing the offence, and called the town council’s arguments “somewhat convoluted and perplexing”. Judge Yeo added that the facts clearly showed that AHPETC had to apply for a permit, contrary to its initial claim. At sentencing on 24 December, AHPETC was fined \$800, with the maximum penalty being a \$1,000 fine. Ms Lim said that the town council had paid the fine but was “not satisfied with the outcome of the case” and would pursue the matter in the High Court.⁸⁷

Issues with financial management and corporate governance

On 14 February, the 2012/13 financial statements of AHPETC were brought into the spotlight. Independent auditors Foo Kon Tan Grant Thornton said that they were “unable to express an opinion” on the AHPETC’s statement for the second year running, as they could not determine if more than \$22 million worth of items were valid or accurate. The auditors also highlighted 13 points of concern with the statement. MND flagged this finding as a “cause for concern”, noting that AHPETC had not provided auditors with necessary financial details and did not comply with the rules for certain financial transfers.⁸⁸ Based on their observations, the auditors said AHPETC “has not complied” with the provisions of the Town Councils Act and the Town Councils Financial Rules.

Ms Lim defended the town council, saying that AHPETC had fixed various problems previously highlighted in 2013. However, MND pointed out that the auditor’s report showed this to not be the case, and had in fact surfaced nine new issues, including non-compliance of rules and insufficient disclosure of information. On 20 February, MND Minister Khaw Boon Wan expressed concern over the state of AHPETC accounts, and requested that DPM Tharman exercise his powers under the Audit Act to order the Auditor-General to conduct a full audit of the AHPETC accounts for 2012. DPM Tharman agreed, saying that he shared Minister Khaw’s concerns. Ms Lim welcomed the audit and assured auditors that they would have the WP’s “full co-operation in this matter”.⁸⁹

More controversy followed on 5 November with the release of the MND Town Council Management Report. AHPETC received “red” bandings — the lowest rating — for its collection of service and conservancy charges (S&CC) and corporate governance.⁹⁰ For S&CC collection, AHPETC’s arrears rate rose from 2.6% in financial year (FY) 2010, to 8.4% in FY 2011 and 2012, to 29.4% in end-April 2013. The town council then stopped submitting its monthly S&CC reports altogether, despite repeated reminders. AHPETC had also gone from recording a surplus of \$3.3 million in FY 2010 to an operating deficit of \$734,000 in FY 2012.⁹¹ For corporate governance, AHPETC scored poorly due to its failure to submit financial statements and rectify issues identified by independent auditors.

MND called the S&CC arrears situation as being of “grave public concern”, with Minister of State for National Development Desmond Lee warning that it could have “serious implications” for residents, causing the delivery of essential services to be affected. Socio-political site *The Online Citizen* published a post questioning whether the operating deficit for AHPETC was due to it receiving less grants for S&CC costs from the government.⁹² MND responded by releasing figures showing that grants were based on the number of HDB flats,

with smaller flats getting higher grants. Furthermore, it was revealed that 63% of AHPETC households had started owing their arrears only in the past two years.⁹³

On 11 November, Ms Lim said that the WP was studying data on its overdue S&CC charges, and would address the issue after the Auditor-General's audits on its financial statements were completed and made public. She declined further comment on the state of AHPETC's finances. On November 22, Mr Lee further accused the AHPETC of "serious financial mismanagement", saying that it had yet to account for its high S&CC arrears. He added that the explanations had not been forthcoming, but there was instead "a coordinated online campaign to distract the public, using falsehoods, half-truths and speculations, by friends, sympathisers and proxies of the WP."⁹⁴ WP MPs Pritam Singh and Png Eng Huat replied that the town council had not "obfuscated or intentionally delayed" its response, and that MND would make the eventual audit report public when completed.

Residents who were asked about the arrears issue generally expressed a degree of sympathy toward the town council; however, a significant proportion agreed that AHPETC should be more transparent about the issue. They believed that AHPETC should release data showing who had not paid and why, and pointed out that residents who had paid their S&CC charges on time might see this as unfair towards them and a violation of basic collective responsibility.⁹⁵ *The Straits Times* reader Lau Hak Tiong wrote in to the Forum, criticising the poor maintenance of the streets in his area and calling for greater transparency from AHPETC.⁹⁶

The Committee of Inquiry (COI) on the Little India riot

Following the Little India riot in December 2013, the government convened a COI into the incident. The COI comprised a four-man panel led by former Supreme Court judge G. Pannir Selvam. It sought to pinpoint the causes of the riot and ascertain the sequence of events that occurred on the night of the incident, featuring testimony from police officers and civil defence workers at the scene. The panel also interviewed high-ranking police officers, representatives from NGOs, and academics in various areas to get a sense of what could be done to prevent and respond to future disturbances.⁹⁷

After multiple testimonies over a five-week period and months of deliberation, the COI submitted its report to DPM Teo on 27 June, and its findings were released to the public on the same day.⁹⁸

The COI found that a foreign worker, Sakthivel Kumaravelu, had lost his balance and fallen over into the path of an oncoming bus, causing his immediate death from being run over. The bus driver and timekeeper were not to blame, as Mr Kumaravelu was heavily intoxicated at the time. However, the crowd that had gathered upon the scene — comprised mainly of foreign workers — blamed the bus employees, which was exacerbated by first responders shielding the latter, possibly fuelling the notion that authorities were acting against the interests of foreign workers. They were also further aggravated by untrue rumours that spread through the crowd that the timekeeper had pushed Mr Kumaravelu off the bus, and that the victim had been crying for help under the bus.

Based on the events that transpired, the COI pinpointed three major factors contributing to the riot: misunderstanding about the accident and response; culture and psychology of the crowd; and alcohol and intoxication.

The COI noted that “the events of the night had violated [the crowd’s] expectations that the responding agencies ought to be fair and respond to the deceased first, rather than to the locals”, and that some of the rioters were fuelled by a desire for “street justice”. Furthermore, alcohol was deemed to be a “major contributory factor” to the “nature and escalation of the riot”, with many present at the scene admitting to having consumed alcohol on the night itself. The police response was criticised, with the COI pointing out four lapses that could have been avoided, though these were seen to be an “aberration” and not systematic or serious failings.⁹⁹

The COI also stressed, however, that South Asian migrant workers should not be unduly viewed as a threat to public order, noting that the vast majority of workers were law-abiding, and that many in the crowd had also attempted to assist responding officers.

In its report, the COI made eight recommendations. These were: improving police communications to help officers deal with the situation on the ground; appropriately training and equipping officers to defuse situations and contain public order incidents; increasing police manpower and presence; building the ability of the police and civil defence force to effectively respond; cutting the layers of approval and time needed to activate resources to respond to situations; installing additional lighting, safety and surveillance devices in areas with large congregations of foreign workers; making more services and amenities available to foreign workers outside of congregation areas; and more strictly enforcing rules against public drunkenness and putting in place restrictions on alcohol sale and consumption.¹⁰⁰

Manpower Minister Tan Chuan-Jin said that the COI findings put to rest speculation that the riot occurred due to underlying discontent with living conditions in Singapore, further citing a Migrant Workers’ Centre (MWC) survey which found that foreign workers were “highly satisfied” with working here and saw Singapore as an “attractive place to work”.¹⁰¹ Local non-government organisation Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) welcomed the COI’s recommendations to improve the welfare of foreign workers, advocating the importance of communication and cultural awareness in fostering a better relationship between foreign workers and local authorities. TWC2 however also noted that much was yet to be done to educate workers of their rights and ensure that their grievances were addressed in a timely and just manner.¹⁰²

On 7 July, the government accepted all eight recommendations of the COI. DPM Teo thanked the COI and laid out steps that the government would take to meet the recommendations. These included installing additional cameras and lighting, deploying more police officers in Little India on weekends, the shortening of operating hours for buses ferrying foreign workers from dormitories to Little India, and restrictions on the sale and consumption of alcohol. DPM Teo also noted that the government had been proactive in its efforts to improve certain areas since the riot, pointing to the Public Order (Temporary Measures) Act. On alcohol consumption, he added that the government would introduce necessary legislation before the expiry of the Act in March 2015.¹⁰³

The government also laid out measures to improve the welfare of foreign workers. Minister Tan said that the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) would increase the number of dedicated recreation centres for foreign workers, and ensure that new dormitories would be self-contained, with amenities such as gymnasiums and mini-marts and sufficient space for living and gathering. He added that efforts were under way to create more targeted and easy-to-understand materials for foreign workers to grasp key messages about their rights and courses of action, and improve outreach to workers so that they would be able to seek assistance.¹⁰⁴ DPM Teo added that the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) would look into plans to improve cultural sensitivity and training for police officers and improve their ability to handle large-scale public order events.¹⁰⁵

Debate Over “Constructive Politics”

Speaking at the re-opening of Parliament on 16 May after the House was prorogued on 15 April, President Tony Tan urged Singaporeans to maintain “constructive politics that puts our nation and people first.” He said that Singapore should embrace conflicting views and robust debate, but ensure that it did not divide people as that would weaken the country. President Tan added that “all sides should take a long-term perspective for the common good” and “come together again... to move ahead as one united people.”¹⁰⁶

Responding to President Tan’s remarks, WP Secretary-General Low Thia Kiang said in Parliament on 26 May that constructive politics did not happen “by the order of the government”. He made reference to “high-handed” tactics by political parties, saying that if people supported that party, a “bullying” political culture was being endorsed. Mr Low also pointed out that “constructive politics” does not mean “compliant politics”, and that he would object should this be the definition used by the government.

Mr Low’s comments drew rebuttals, first from Senior Minister of State for Law and Education Indranee Rajah, and then from PM Lee. Ms Indranee questioned if the WP was capable of constructive politics, referring to contracts awarded by the AHPETC to a managing agent owned by WP supporters. She also pointed out policies on which the WP had apparently changed its stance over the years, including on foreign workers, accusing them of flip-flopping and “pandering to public opinion.”¹⁰⁷ Mr Low replied that the WP had not flip-flopped, and the PAP was free to file a motion if they wished to have a full debate on any issue.

On 28 May, PM Lee spoke on constructive politics in a Parliamentary speech, leading to an exchange between him and Mr Low. PM Lee said that the PAP had tried its best to practise constructive politics, and opposition parties should be held to the same standards. Here, he echoed Ms Indranee’s earlier criticisms of the WP, saying that Mr Low’s denial of flip-flopping was “simply false”. He added that Mr Low had “nothing to say about the substance of the government’s programme”, calling Mr Low’s views “breathhtakingly cynical”.¹⁰⁸

In return, Mr Low said that he had made constructive politics the focus of his remarks as it was an important issue raised by President Tan. He maintained that the WP had not flip-flopped on the issue of foreign workers, saying that the PAP was instead guilty of that when it performed policy U-turns. PM Lee replied that the PAP did acknowledge shifts, accusing the WP of being low-profile in Parliament but turning into “tigers and heroes” come election

time. This exchange ended with Mr Low saying the WP was “responsible opposition” and PM Lee calling for the WP to be held accountable for changing its views.

The exchange between the two men was picked up by local socio-political sites and blogs. Blogger Bertha Henson, formerly of The Breakfast Network, said that constructive politics would have to embrace an active citizenry, in contrast to the government view that we should “just shut up and hand out face masks.” However, she agreed that there could not be “civilised discourse without some parameters.”¹⁰⁹ *The Online Citizen* sided with Mr Low, pointing out an instance where PM Lee had seemingly flip-flopped and saying Ms Indraneel and PM Lee had engaged in “destructive politicking” by “regurgitating old accusations of the WP.”¹¹⁰ The Independent Singapore meanwhile conducted a survey of 100 people at various locations in Singapore, asking them about the exchange. They found that 62 people did not care about the debate at all, while remaining respondents felt they were more convinced by the debater rather than the content of the debate.

The 2014 PAP Party Conference

The 2014 PAP party Conference and Rally was held on December 7. This commemorated the PAP’s 60th anniversary, and marked the party’s first rally since 2004, its 50th anniversary.

During the conference, 12 Cabinet members — including PM Lee, DPM Teo and DPM Tharman — were voted back into the party’s Central Executive Committee (CEC). In his speech, PM Lee issued a rallying cry to party members, saying that the next General Election — due to be held by January 2017 — would be “a deadly serious fight” for Singapore’s future and that the PAP would fight to win every seat. He also said that the future of Singapore was at stake, and that the PAP was the only party to put forth a vision and a road map for Singapore.¹¹¹

The PAP also amended its Constitution for the first time since 1982, a move which Minister Khaw Boon Wan called “timely”. The amendments put forth an updated vision for Singapore, focusing on three major areas: ensuring opportunities for all Singaporeans; upholding a fair and just society; and nurturing a democracy of deeds.¹¹²

CIVIC ACTIVISM***The Legal Challenge to Section 377A and Contempt of Court Action Against Alex Au***

In July 2014, the Court of Appeal heard the case by Gary Lim, Kenneth Chee and Tan Eng Hong against the constitutionality of Section 377A, which criminalises sexual acts between men under Singapore's Penal Code. The High Court had ruled earlier in 2013 that the law was constitutional, citing the Parliament's decision to retain it in 2007. Mr Lim and Mr Chee had initially submitted a separate case from Mr Tan, but the Court of Appeal agreed to hear the two appeals together on the grounds that the issues on both cases were "essentially the same".

Mr Lim, Mr Chee and Mr Tan argued that Section 377A was unconstitutional, as it breached laws and personal liberty and unlawful discrimination. They requested that the law be modified so that it would not apply to consenting adults and sexual acts done in private.¹¹³

The Court of Appeals issued its final ruling on the case in October 2014. It upheld the law, ruling that the guarantee of equal protection under the law as enshrined in Article 12 of the Singapore Constitution touched only on issues relating to religion, race, place of birth and descent, not gender, sex and sexual orientation. Judge of Appeal Andrew Phang, speaking for a three-person panel consisting of Justices Belinda Ang and Woo Bih Li, said, "While we understand the deeply-held personal feelings of the appellants, there is nothing this court can do to assist them. Their remedy lies, if at all, in the legislative sphere."¹¹⁴

Blogger Alex Au had earlier published two articles in 2013 relating to the High Court hearing. The Attorney General's Chambers (AGC) had applied for permission to start contempt of court proceedings over two articles that Mr Au had written on his blog, Yawning Bread, alleging that the articles risked undermining confidence in the judiciary. Permission was initially granted for the first article, but rejected for the second. However, the Court of Appeal ruled in March 2014 that the AGC would need to file a new application to pursue proceedings against Mr Au, as it had taken the wrong legal procedure which was "not applicable to contempt of court proceedings."¹¹⁵

It was later explained that the AGC had appealed against the decision that the second article on Mr Au's blog had insufficient basis for contempt. However, an error in the document led to an e-filing glitch, which in turn caused the appeal to be filed beyond the seven-day deadline, leading a series of administrative problems for the AGC that culminated in the dismissal of proceedings.¹¹⁶ On 9 May, the Court of Appeal indicated that the AGC had been granted more time to appeal.¹¹⁷ On 31 July, the Court reversed its initial decision, allowing the AGC to proceed on both articles.¹¹⁸

The court hearing was held on 21 October, with Mr Au being represented by lawyers Peter Low and Choo Zheng Xi, while Senior State Counsel Tai Wei Shyong represented the AGC. After hearing arguments from both sides, Justice Ang reserved judgement on the case.¹¹⁹ The verdict is due at a later date.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual (LGBT) Issues

The Health Promotion Board (HPB) Views on Sexuality

In February, a Frequently-Asked-Questions (FAQs) section on the HPB's website on sexuality¹²⁰ attracted attention and went viral. This was due to its answers on topics such as sexual orientation and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). The FAQs stated that homosexuality and bisexuality were not mental illnesses, and provided advice on how to deal with feelings of attraction to people of the same gender.

Lawrence Khong, Senior Pastor at mega-church Faith Community Baptist Church (FCBC) wrote an op-ed in *MyPaper* to express his objections to the FAQs, saying that they "undermine family"¹²¹. An online petition was launched by "Aaron", titled "Review HPB's 'FAQ on Sexuality'", describing the FAQs as "questionable and objectionable", having an "implicit pro-homosexuality stance which... is detrimental to our society."¹²² The petition called for Health Minister Gan Kim Yong to review the information on the FAQs, and garnered more than 1,700 signatures within three days, rising to 26,000 by December.¹²³

On the other hand, the FAQs attracted praise from some groups, with LGBT group Pink Dot describing it as "objective and aligned with globally accepted scientific standards." Bryan Choong, Executive Director of counselling service Oogachaga, said that young people would be able to get appropriate information about sexuality from the questions and answers.¹²⁴ A counter-petition was set up by "Melissa Tsang", urging the government to ignore the earlier petition to review the FAQs and restore links to LGBT websites that had been removed.¹²⁵

As of 11 December 2014, the FAQs remained on the HPB website, albeit with the links to LGBT websites still removed.

The Pink Dot versus Wear White movements

The 2014 Pink Dot event, an annual LGBT rights community event in Singapore, was scheduled to be held on 28 June. This was the sixth year in a row that Pink Dot had been held here, following its first event in 2009. This year's Pink Dot coincided with the start of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan. In response, a "WearWhite" online campaign was launched on June 20 by Islamic religious teacher Ustaz Noor Deros.¹²⁶

The campaign called upon Muslims to wear white on 28 June in protest of the Pink Dot event and the "growing normalization of LGBT" in Singapore. A website and Facebook page were set up for WearWhite, saying that the movement "encourages a return to the values as guided by Islam", including "prioritizing the family and marriage, responsibility and justice and fair dealings." It also stated that "marriage between a man and a woman forms the basis of the family."¹²⁷ Videos of various Muslim Singaporeans wearing white and professing support for the movement were also posted on the website.

WearWhite garnered support from some Muslim religious and student groups, as well as Pastor Khong, who held a special church service at FCBC on June 28 to protest the Pink Dot. Over 6,000 people wore white and attended the service to "defend marriage."¹²⁸ Some Muslims also wore white to mosque prayers across the island to support the movement¹²⁹, with the WearWhite Facebook page posting photos of supporters.

Pink Dot went ahead as scheduled on the same day, with an estimated 26,000 people in attendance at Hong Lim Park at its peak. This was the largest turnout for Pink Dot, surpassing the 21,000 that was achieved in 2013.¹³⁰

Opinion was divided on the two movements. Some wondered whether the Pink Dot movement was attempting to promote a gay lifestyle, while others highlighted the sanctity of marriage between men and women. On the other side, some also expressed support for Pink Dot and the freedom to love.¹³¹

The Nature Society Position Paper on the Cross Island Line

In July 2013, the Nature Society of Singapore (NSS) published a Position Paper detailing its stand on the proposed Cross Island Line first featured in the Population White Paper (2013). The Paper criticised the environmental impact of the underground mass rapid transit line as it would involve construction works across the Central Catchment Nature Reserve (CCNR). It proposed an alternative route that would go around the reserve but would add 1.7 to 2 km to the Cross Island Line, and some four minutes in travel time.

In response, the Land Transport Authority (LTA) agreed to postpone its Environmental Impact Assessment study till early 2014, when nature groups had a chance to submit their ecological study to the LTA. On 2 February, seven environmentalists submitted a 120-page document to the LTA describing the extent of biodiversity in the CCNR area which they hoped would convince the authorities and EIA consultants to preserve the CCNR.

On 24 February, LTA announced on its Facebook page that it had worked with various groups to address concerns over the Cross Island Line, and had finalised the scope of the EIA.¹³² It also stated that the EIA would take into account all input — including the two reports, which would serve as “useful resources¹³³” — and that no physical work would begin until the EIA was completed in 2016.

Civil Society Activist Louis Ng Joins the PAP

In October, Louis Ng, the founder of the NGO, Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (ACRES), joined the PAP. In a Facebook post titled “Am I Entering Politics?”, Mr Ng stated that he had been approached by Minister Tan Chuan-Jin in May to join the PAP, and took a month to decide in the affirmative. Mr Ng had previously been noted for his work on advocacy for animal rights, sitting on the board of various government-formed committees on animal welfare, and working closely with Law Minister K Shanmugam since 2008.

Mr Ng’s move raised some eyebrows, with several political analysts and socio-political sites noting that the move was extremely rare in Singapore — particularly for a leader of a combative NGO that had often found itself on opposing sides from the government and large corporation,¹³⁴ most notably aggressively campaigning against Resorts World Sentosa (RWS) on the issue of dolphin captivity. Mr Ng acknowledged that people could see possible conflicts of interest in his roles, but said that he did not think it would be an issue, citing other MPs who were also advocates for particular causes.

Online forums decried the move, saying that it politicised animal rights issues and that activists should remain neutral.¹³⁵ However, others pointed out that this arrangement was not

unusual in foreign countries, and his activism would be unlikely to be affected simply by his politics.

Roy Ngerng and Activism and the CPF

The defamation suit against Roy Ngerng

On 15 May, blogger Roy Ngerng published a post on his personal blog The Heart Truths,¹³⁶ regarding the CPF and retirement adequacy in Singapore, titled “Where Your CPF Money Is Going: Learning From The City Harvest Trial”. In it, he drew parallels between the ongoing City Harvest trial and how CPF monies were managed, and included a picture which mapped the alleged relationships between PM Lee, the CPF, the Monetary Authority of Singapore, Temasek Holdings and GIC.

On 18 May, lawyers for PM Lee served Mr Ngerng a letter of demand, asking that the post be removed as it had been “published maliciously” and implied that Mr Lee was “guilty of criminal misappropriation of monies paid in the CPF”. The letter additionally demanded compensation from Mr Ngerng, and asked that the post be removed by 21 May and an offer of damages be made, or legal action would be taken against Mr Ngerng for defamation. Mr Ngerng published the letter on his blog, and requested for an extension to 23 May, which was granted.¹³⁷

Mr Ngerng removed the offending post on 23 May, issuing an apology to PM Lee on his blog. Represented by lawyer M Ravi, Mr Ngerng acknowledged that the allegation was false and “completely without foundation”, apologised “unreservedly” to PM Lee, and requested that the demand for damages be dropped. This request was rejected by PM Lee’s lawyer, Davinder Singh, who said that Mr Lee was “entitled in law” to those costs.¹³⁸

The next day, Mr Ngerng put up a 14-minute YouTube video titled “Roy Ngerng’s Message: Defamation Suit From Singapore Prime Minister” on his blog. In it, he repeated his call for the government to be more transparent about CPF funds. This led to PM Lee’s lawyers issuing a fresh letter of demand on 26 May, demanding that Mr Ngerng remove four additional blog posts as well as the YouTube video by the end of the day. Lawyers for PM Lee further argued that Mr Ngerng’s previous apology “was not and never meant to be genuine”, and indicated that they would pursue aggravated damages should the demand not be met.¹³⁹

Mr Ngerng removed the videos before the deadline, and made an offer of S\$5,000 in damages to PM Lee, proposing that each party bore its own legal costs. However, PM Lee’s lawyers rejected the offer, calling it “derisory” and disregarding the gravity of Mr Ngerng’s “calculated and systematic aggravation”.¹⁴⁰ Legal proceedings on Mr Ngerng’s defamation lawsuit thus began on 28 May.

Following the denouement, Mr Ngerng posted an appeal for funds on his personal blog on 29 May, asking members of the public contribute to his “Legal Defense (sic) Fund”. He estimated that his legal fees would amount to at least S\$70,000, including filing fees, research, and legal fees, and provided his personal bank account and PayPal details for people to contribute.¹⁴¹ Mr Ngerng posted two additional updates on 30 May and 31 May,

stating that he had received S\$15,000 and S\$36,000, respectively.¹⁴² By 4 June, Mr Ngerng had raised about S\$81,000.¹⁴³

Mr Ngerng continued to write about the CPF on his personal blog in the meantime, and also appeared at the “Return Our CPF” protest on 7 June at Hong Lim Park, where he persisted in his call for more transparency on CPF monies and Singapore’s reserves.¹⁴⁴ It was reported on 10 June that Mr Ngerng had been sacked from his job at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH), where he worked as a patient coordinator at the Communicable Disease Centre. TTSH stated the reason for termination was “conduct incompatible with the values and standards expected of employees” and “misusing working time, hospital computers and facilities for personal pursuits”. The Ministry of Health (MOH) subsequently released a statement supporting TTSH’s decision.¹⁴⁵

On 18 June, Mr Ravi filed Mr Ngerng’s defence against the charges of defamation. In it, Mr Ngerng stated that he had never had any intention of accusing PM Lee of misappropriating CPF funds, and that the offer of damages was not “derisory” but rather based on Mr Ngerng’s “modest living and income” from his job at the time of the offer. It was also reported that Mr Ngerng had raised more than S\$107,000 from crowd-funding at this time.¹⁴⁶ The defence also requested more details as to why the demand for aggravated damages was brought up. PM Lee’s lawyers responded on 25 June, arguing that Mr Ngerng had never intended to apologise sincerely or remove the blog post. They pointed out that Mr Ngerng had not removed the video but merely made it private, and sent emails to local and foreign media notifying them of the posts.¹⁴⁷

On 12 July, lawyers for PM Lee applied for a summary judgement against Mr Ngerng, in which they asked the courts to decide on the damages, and sought an order to stop Mr Ngerng from publishing or disseminating allegations of misappropriation of Singaporeans’ CPF monies.¹⁴⁸

Mr Ngerng responded in an affidavit on 4 August, which he sent to PM Lee and published on his blog.¹⁴⁹ In it, he disputed the claims of defamation and reiterated that he had apologised and never meant to imply PM Lee was guilty of the misappropriation of CPF funds. PM Lee’s lawyers then responded on 30 August, arguing that parts of the affidavit are “inadmissible, irrelevant and/or an abuse of the process of the court.”¹⁵⁰

A High Court hearing was held on 19 September,¹⁵¹ with a verdict issued on 7 November. In it, Justice Lee Seiu Kin ruled that Mr Ngerng had defamed PM Lee, and that the constitutional right to free speech is restricted by the law of defamation. Justice Lee also granted an injunction barring Mr Ngerng from disseminating or publishing any allegations that PM Lee had misappropriated CPF monies. The amount of damages that Mr Ngerng would need to pay would be assessed at a later date.¹⁵²

Fracas at Hong Lim Park: Return Our CPF and the YMCA charity carnival

On 27 September, another “Return Our CPF” rally was held at Hong Lim Park, featuring CPF activists including Mr Ngerng and blogger Han Hui Hui. A charity carnival organised by the YMCA for special needs children was also held at the same time, with the Guest-of-Honour being Minister of State for Trade and Industry Teo Ser Luck.

The events had been allocated separate spaces by NParks; however, upon seeing Mr Teo arrive at the latter event, the “Return Our CPF” rally marched through the charity carnival, waving Singapore flags and chanting “Vote them out, PAP” and “Return our CPF”, disrupting a dance item by a group of special needs children. Some protesters also went up to Mr Teo, saying “Teo Ser Luck, return our CPF”. Mr Teo had to console a child who had been frightened by the heckling at the event.¹⁵³

News of the heckling drew widespread condemnation. Manpower Minister Tan Chuan-Jin called the heckling a “total and absolute disgrace”, and WP activists said it was “uncalled for.”¹⁵⁴ Mr Ngerng and Ms Han defended their actions, claiming that they did not heckle the children on stage and walked off once they realised the nature of the event. A video was posted online, showing Ms Han’s refusal to comply when NParks and police officers asked her to move out of the space allocated to YMCA.¹⁵⁵ The Singapore Police Force (SPF) and NParks subsequently indicated that they were considering measures to ensure that no such situations would occur in future at Hong Lim Park. Ms Han also had approval for a planned speech and demonstration on 25 October revoked.¹⁵⁶

On 24 October, six members of the Return Our CPF event, including Mr Ngerng and Ms Han, were charged with causing public nuisance and staging a demonstration at the park without approval.¹⁵⁷ Two of the members were also issued conditional police warnings. An initial closed-door hearing was held on 24 November and adjourned to 15 December, with a verdict due at a later date.¹⁵⁸

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