

ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN

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HIS was the final decision.

But President S R Nathan also underlined yesterday the importance of his six-member Council of Presidential Advisers in the exercise of the second key.

The six, as well as two alternate members who stand in for the others when needed, were with Mr Nathan for all the briefings — from the financial and economic updates given since August, to the specifics of the two schemes for which the reserves would be tapped.

He had to consult the council, which deliberated on the Government's request and then made their recommendations to him.

This power to exercise the second key is one reason why a high benchmark for financial experience and ability has always been part of the eligibility criteria for the Presidency.

As the key is used for the first time this year, Mr Nathan has been able to call upon experienced advisers, who have chaired or are chairing the likes



(From left) Mr Lim Chee Onn, Mr Po'ad Bin Shaik Abu Bakar Mattar, Mr S Dhanabalan, Mr JY Pillay, Prof Cham Tao Soon, Mr Yong Pung How, Mr Goh Joon Seng and Mr Stephen Lee Ching Yen. PHOTO COURTESY THE ISTANA

of Singapore Airlines, Singapore Exchange, Temasek Holdings and SIM University.

Interestingly, however, the only qualifications to be appointed to the council are Singaporean citizenship and residence as well as age (not less than 35). "The (eligibility) gap is pretty obvious," said constitutional expert Dr Kevin Tan, an adjunct professor with the National University of Singapore.

Should the Constitution stipulate a higher bar?

Dr Tan believes the President should not be curtailed by more specific eligibility criteria to choose council members — a view

shared by constitutional expert Thio Li-ann. "Why would you set yourself up to fail (as President) by choosing idiots (as advisers)," said the Nominated MP.

Rather, Dr Tan feels it would help were the President given more leeway to hire sufficient technical experts to assist him. Why? Some public sector roles (such as Speaker of Parliament) that allow an individual to qualify for the Presidency do not require "technical expertise" in financial matters, only broad "judgment", he pointed out.

The President appoints three members, one on the advice of

the Chief Justice; the Prime Minister appoints two and the Public Service Commission chairman appoints one. Of the alternate members, one is appointed by the President, the other nominated by the Prime Minister.

Even if there are polarised views in the council, the "chips will still fall on the President", said Prof Thio. "We place a great deal of trust on the President to speak up when it's wise and to disagree when it's wise."

Yesterday, the President spoke up. He had the backing of all his men. The hope is that they will always be wise.