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Insight
Quality debate v democratic ideals

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PARLIAMENT'S unelected members scored big with voters last Wednesday when they sought to change Singapore's by-election law.

Two Nominated MPs (Professor Thio Li-Ann and Dr Loo Choon Yong) had filed a motion, asking that a by-election be required by law if the minority member, or half or more members, of a group representation constituency (GRC) slate vacate their seats mid-term.

Three of their colleagues (Ms Eunice Olsen, Mr Siew Kum Hong and Associate Professor Kalyani Mehta) backed them when the House voted on the motion. The final score: 62 nays, five ayes.

All this took place in an enthralling four-hour session, which also starred Non-Constituency MP Sylvia Lim.

She hijacked the motion and pushed instead to abolish GRCs. Speaker Abdullah Tarmugi told her to file a separate motion.

The NMPs who spoke for the motion won praise from politically aware Singaporeans, including the blogging community. They were seen as elevating the debate from bread-and-butter concerns like cost of living and child-care matters to more lofty issues on constitutional and political rights.

The ruling party gave them kudos too.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong opposed the motion but gave credit to the NMPs. He ended his Parliament speech by saying: 'We introduced Nominated MPs to raise the level of debate and promote diversity of views.'

'I think it has worked because with the NMP scheme, we've had two NMPs raise a serious motion and make two good speeches. We disagree with them but I think they have raised the standard of debate in this House.'

He concluded: 'So we will continue to evolve our system in order to make it work better for Singapore.'

The NMPs' success in reflecting issues discussed by voters and adding to the debate may well turn out to be a double-edged sword.

It is likely to be used by the Government as a reason to further entrench the NMP scheme in Singapore's political system. For instance, they could move to allow for more NMPs.

Currently, the Constitution allows for up to nine of them. Their term lasts for 2.5 years after which they can reapply for the post. Each Parliament can decide whether there should be NMPS during its term.

On its own merit, the NMP scheme has worked well.

It was instituted 18 years ago to allow for diverse views to be reflected by non-partisan individuals who didn't need to be hampered by the party whip.

Some individuals have made their mark in policy-making. One was Attorney-General Walter Woon, an NMP from 1992 to 1996.

He was the key driver behind the House approving the landmark Maintenance of Parents Bill in 1994.

Other NMPs have brought up causes that were not often heard in the House. Law professor Simon Tay

(1997 to 2001) and eye surgeon Geh Min (2004 to 2006), for instance, championed a host of environmental issues during their terms.

But the criticism that has dogged the scheme since 1990 still stands.

One comment: The scheme dilutes Singapore's parliamentary democracy by allowing unelected members into the House.

PAP stalwart and six-term MP Tan Cheng Bock, in a commentary for this paper two years back, said the scheme encouraged 'non risk-taking'.

'To be in the House, they must join the political arena, fight and earn this right,' he said.

He was also bothered by the way the system had evolved, with a trend towards 'sectarian representation'.

After a bout of rather blah nominees, key groups like the labour movement, professional bodies and the social services sector were invited to suggest candidates.

Effectively, Dr Tan argued, the candidates who got into Parliament became proxies speaking on behalf of these groups.

Harsher critics have called NMPs pseudo-opposition MPs, for the simple fact that they are there to offer alternative views, after a select committee of eight MPs (currently all from the PAP) recommends their appointment to Parliament.

The irony of this rather illiberal system has not been lost on political liberals like Prof Thio, who was once critical of the scheme.

In fact, she titled her NMP application essay: 'Why I am willing to eat my words: A personal motivation.'

Imperfect or not, this system is here to stay. At a constituency event in opposition-held Hougang in July, Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong defended Singapore's style of governance.

The NMP and NCMP schemes, he admitted, meant that Singapore did not have a 'Western-style liberal democracy'.

'But it has worked for us. It has given us a good and effective government, political stability and progress.

'It has facilitated honest and competent people, who ordinarily would not want to be in the thick of politics, to come forward and participate in the political arena.'

Taken together with PM Lee's comments in Parliament, it is reasonable to wonder if we are likely to see more NMPs in future.

At this point, Singapore society might ponder the following: Where do we go from here? What principles should undergird further tweaks to the political system?

Should we go with what 'works' for Singapore or stick close to a set of democratic ideals that society can agree upon? (Here, I am not advocating that these ideals be based on the traditional Western model of democracy.)

Ideals that society can reasonably hope for include a level playing field for political parties, where gerrymandering is a bad word found in textbooks, and the electorate able to discern between rational, cogent arguments and emotional rhetoric.

Another ideal could be that every member seated in the hallowed House is there as an elected representative of the people, to stay true to the principles of a parliamentary democracy.

Sticking to this ideal is however no guarantee of strong alternative voices in Parliament.

Remember the first half of the 1990s when two out of four opposition MPs did not do much for political debate in the House?

The current three are living up to what they promised voters, but because they have no obvious succession plans, an all-white Parliament is an all-too-likely possibility in future elections.

The question worth asking now then is, which should take precedence: quality debate or ideals?

For me, the answer is the latter.

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