



News

One MP less, is it too much?

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AFTER nearly four hours of heated debate, with five Nominated MPs, two Worker's Party members, two PAP backbenchers and the Prime Minister having their say, the vote was almost anti-climactic.

On the motion to urge the Government to tweak the laws on when by-elections should be called, five parliamentarians said "yes", while 62 said "no". The votes were cast electronically, with the Whip in place.

There would have been at least one extra "aye" — but NMP Gautam Bannerjee, who rose to speak after the Prime Minister, said Mr Lee's half-hour speech had changed his mind.

Among the four parliamentarians who argued in favour of the motion — including NMPs Thio Li-ann and Loo Choon Yong, who had tabled the motion for debate — some felt the lack of specifics in the current laws led to ambiguity.

The first to speak, Prof Thio, pointed out that "if desired, the Cabinet can keep a vacant seat vacant until the next General Election". But such discretion left room for potential abuse of power.

Setting a timeframe — three months, she suggested — on when by-elections should be called after a seat is vacated, is one legal limit that could be put on such power.

But MP Hri Kumar Nair (Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC) felt it was "sensible to keep things flexible" and let the Prime Minister decide without the need to "tie his hands".

Another common theme in the debate: What was the "threshold" for when voters were no longer well-represented, hence requiring a by-election?

Prof Thio and Dr Loo had proposed that this be the case when a minority-race MP in a GRC, at least half the members of a GRC team, or an MP from a single-seat ward vacate their seats.

Fellow NMP Siew Kum Hong went further, saying a by-election should be called when "any vacancy occurs", as a matter of principle in a democracy.

But MP Halimah Yacob — who with her fellow Jurong GRC teammates is covering the duties of the late Dr Ong Chit Chung — disagreed. "The voters in Jurong GRC had voted us as a team and not as individuals," she said. "It is baseless to say ... with the absence of one or more (members) that the rest of us have lost our electoral mandate and have to resign."

Mr Siew felt, however, that saying the remaining MPs were able to cover the duties of another would "trivialise and downplay" the contributions of elected representatives.

Moreover, in Jurong GRC, he pointed out, two of the four remaining MPs are full ministers. "Do we really want to risk overburdening the Minister for Finance in these trying economic times?"

"Practicality demands a by-election, and certainly in Jurong GRC," added Mr Siew, who along with Dr Loo, had asked for the party whip to be lifted so that all backbenchers could vote freely.

Mdm Halimah opposed the idea of mandating a by-election when a minority MP vacates the seat. This, she felt, would lead foster resentment against minorities, since it would seem these MPs have the power to hold other members ransom by threatening to resign.

Hougang MP Low Thia Kiang said minority representation was not as issue, seeing how Mr J B Jeyaretnam in 1981 had contested and won in the mainly-Chinese ward of Anson. Mr Low and Non-constituency MP Sylvia Lim argued for GRCs to be abolished, but the attempt to amend the original motion for debate was struck out.

Going beyond the legalities, NMP Eunice Olsen argued that it was important to see by-elections as part of the efforts to engage citizens in debate and participation in nation-building, as outlined by the Prime Minister in his National Day Rally speech. "I believe this motion strengthens citizenship," she said.

Referring to how political leaders have, in the past, cited the distraction from more pressing economic issues as a reason for not holding a by-election, Mr Siew said this implies "that voting and elections are luxuries, and unnecessary in bad times".

"It means that the fundamental principles of democracy can be waived by the Government of the day when deemed inexpedient. That cannot be right," he said.

But Mr Hri said that it was a "fallacy" to assume a direct relationship between the number of polls and the strength of a democracy.

"It's not the case where the ruling party can act with impunity," he said. "Ultimately it will have to account for its decisions at the next elections, and if voters do not find in favour of the ruling party they will dismiss the rulers without bloodshed."

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