

What the election means to me

By Ang Swee Hoon

GROWING up in Katong, my earliest memory of Singapore's political elections was the one in 1968 when, like the many that followed, the People's Action Party (PAP) swept all the seats.

My Member of Parliament (MP) then was Joe Conceicao. At the time, as a seven-year old, I was too young to know what qualities I wanted in an MP. He was the first Eurasian whom I was acquainted with, and the juxtaposition of the vowels in his surname intrigued me. I remembered learning how to pronounce and spell his name correctly.

That was the extent of my involvement in the election. It did not bother me that it was a walkover. After all, the candidate whose name fascinated me remained my MP.

Over the years, as walkovers in my constituency became the norm, I grew weary. I looked with envy at electoral contests in other constituencies and wished there was a similar excitement where I lived.

I recall hearing the coffeeshop uncles debate over which the better party was – the one with the lightning or the one with the hammer. Their simplistic discussions and voting behaviour seemed to revolve around the parties' logo – Can the lightning strike out the hammer, or can the hammer break the lightning's stronghold? Their banter made me all the more curious as to how it would be like if there were to be a contest in my ward.

Staying up past midnight to listen to the election outcome could not satiate my thirst for excitement. I forced myself to stay awake, only to be disappointed as the results became so predictable – the People's Action Party (PAP) not only won a majority of the wards, but with big margins too.

Since then, I have moved thrice. And as fate would have it, I never got a chance to vote, as there were always walkovers in the areas I lived in, until 2011.

At last, I was going to have my say in the outcome of a general election at the ripe age of 50.

The day of political excitement that I longed for as a young girl finally came. No more the name-struck seven-year old, I listened attentively to the speeches by the candidates, as well as those by their colleagues in other constituencies. I wanted a better feel of each party's ideals, especially that of the opposition.

At the bottom of my heart, I wanted the PAP to win. Yet, I did not want the party to take my vote for granted – a complacency that I perceived may have permeated over the years of numerous walkovers.

I wanted to give the PAP a challenge to keep the party on its toes, especially having observed that just across the street, my neighbours belonged to another constituency – the result of artful gerrymandering, some say.

But in the days leading up to polling day, I kept these emotions in check. I mulled the pros and cons, and even worked out the various voting outcomes that could play out, as well as their consequences.

When polling day came, I was observant and wary as a first-time voter. My elec-

toral card had a letter stamped on it. At the polling station, there were different rows for people with different-lettered cards to wait in line for their voting slip.

The researcher in me started to conjure the possible factors behind the different letters. Then came my voting slip which had a serial number, checked and double-checked by the voting officers to ensure that the digits tallied with my name on the register.

Ironically, the frustration of not having been able to vote in the last 29 years dissi-

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pated then. The weight of the occasion made me appreciate the importance of the poll and realise that it was just as well that I did not get a chance to vote when I was younger.

I might well have let emotions and youthful brashness get the better of me. Those 29 years of walkovers were blessings in disguise. I wonder if voters today have given serious thought to the vote, as election rallies can be stoked with emotions. After all, if a promise sounds too good to be true, it is probably not true.

While earlier generations tended to vote simplistically, this generation would do no better if it does not consider the long-term implications of the vote.

I know of many who vote because they want an alternative voice, or due to frustration with present circumstances.

A responsible voting decision should be based on compelling, well-thought-out reasons that lead to viable solutions being implemented, not mere frustration.

Some voting considerations could include: Is there a better solution, no matter

how dire the current situation may be? Would having another voice in Parliament make the government more efficient and effective? What trade-offs am I willing to make to possibly get what I want?

Unlike buying a good, where we have the option of returning or dis-

carding it immediately when we realise we made a wrong purchase, a vote is irreversible for some years – at least until the next general election.

No country is perfect, and we must remember that every vote counts, even the spoilt ones, because they are lost opportunities to sway the result one way or the other. A decision that seems right to an individual, may turn out wrong collectively.

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