

Opposition party members quiz DPM on GST, immigration

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Leaders and members of opposition parties questioned Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat about the goods and services tax (GST), immigration and the elected presidency yesterday at the annual Singapore Perspectives conference, giving a preview of the issues that might dominate at the next general election.

The exchanges followed a speech by Mr Heng in which he set out the fourth-generation political leadership's pledge to work with Singa-

poreans in shaping the country's future and making the partnership a cornerstone policy.

Singapore Democratic Party chairman Paul Tambyah, People's Power Party chief Goh Meng Seng and Progress Singapore Party (PSP) assistant secretary-general Leong Wai Mun were among opposition politicians invited to the conference by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

IPS director Janadas Devan said in his opening remarks that Workers' Party chief Pritam Singh had declined an invitation to speak at the event.

Dr Tambyah fired the first ques-

tion from the floor, questioning the Government's decision to raise GST, which he said is acknowledged universally as regressive. The tax is set to go up from 7 per cent to 9 per cent some time between 2021 and 2025.

But Mr Heng said Singapore's tax system as a whole is progressive, with more benefits going to the lower-income groups,

He cautioned against nitpicking on one or two aspects of it. Also, the GST is borne not just by Singaporeans, but also by anyone who consumes goods and services in Singapore, including tourists and expatriates who work here, he added.

He also said he had considered al-

ternatives, but had less room to play with corporate and personal income taxes as people and companies could relocate easily.

Mr Goh questioned him next on the immigration policy, asking if society could become more divisive if the Government caved to the pressure of new citizens whose allegiances may not lie with Singapore.

Mr Heng said new citizens could indeed become a divisive force if people exploit the issue and "start casting doubts on the loyalty and fitness of new citizens".

He added that there was no reason to doubt their loyalty as they have become citizens by convic-

tion, having chosen to come to Singapore to build a future.

Many are also married to Singaporeans, with one in three marriages here between a Singaporean and a national of another country.

Pointing to how some people have promulgated a narrative which pits born and bred Singaporeans against new citizens, Mr Heng said: "In that regard, I must say I am very troubled that so many people are seeking to exploit these differences instead of making the effort to integrate them."

He added that while the Government must do its best to take care of Singaporeans, taking a nativist ap-

proach is not the way and will cause Singapore to wither.

The issue of the elected presidency was raised by Mr Leong. The PSP's leader, Dr Tan Cheng Bock, became ineligible to run in the 2017 presidential election after the eligibility criteria were tightened.

Mr Leong, who said he was speaking in his personal capacity, argued that such strict criteria would limit the pool of possible candidates and curtail the institution's effectiveness as a check on the Government.

Replying, Mr Heng said the President continues to play a very important role as custodian of Singapore's reserves, citing, for instance, that the Budget cannot be introduced in Parliament until the President has been satisfied it will not draw on past reserves.

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S'pore needs leaders willing to stay the course: Chan

It doesn't need 'fair-weather candidates' who join politics only during good times, he says

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Singapore does not need "fair-weather candidates" who join politics only when times are good, Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing said yesterday.

Instead, it needs leaders who are willing to stay the course, win the trust of Singaporeans, make tough decisions and carry them out, he added.

"In fact, in the toughest of times, we find it easier to select people," Mr Chan said at the annual Singapore Perspectives conference, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies.

"On the other hand, when times are good, there are many people who want to step forward, and you really have to be careful who you choose."

He was responding to Ms Lee Huay Leng, who had asked about the difficulty of getting people to join politics. Ms Lee heads Singapore Press Holdings' Chinese Media Group and was moderating a dialogue with the minister.

Mr Chan also said the intense scrutiny of politicians and their families, especially in the age of social media, may deter prospective candidates from entering politics.

But those who do are "prepared to put aside their personal interests – and to some extent, their families' interests – in service of the country", he said.

He added that the challenge of attracting political talent is not just that of bringing in people with the intellect, but also those with the right values and motivations.

"The first order of business is how do you get people with the right values in, and to the best of our efforts, we may still get it wrong," he said.

"Once they are in, how do we gel them into a coherent team – that they do not love themselves more than they love the country?"

The conference was attended

by nearly 1,000 people, including students, civil servants, academics and representatives from civil society and the private sector, as well as leaders and members of opposition parties.

Speakers at the conference, including Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat, discussed topics such as politics in Singapore and how the political dynamic has shifted in recent years.

During the session, former senior minister of state for foreign affairs Zainul Abidin Rasheed, who is Singapore's non-resident ambassador to Kuwait, asked Mr Chan which policy areas the Government should revisit.

Mr Chan said it is an ongoing effort in many areas, from tracking broad geopolitical shifts to changes in Singapore's domestic societal makeup.

"We cannot assume that just because we have got certain things right at this point in time, that this will always be right," he said. "That would be a very, very bad mistake."

For instance, his ministry is constantly looking at Singapore's economic strategy, he said.

The minister also cited the example of more inter-ethnic marriages and marriages between Singaporeans and foreigners, which means the compartmentalisation of people according to race will have to change.

"The complexion of our society will definitely change in the upcoming years," he said. "And if all these things are going to change, then we have to seriously ask ourselves, every step of the way, are our policies still right and relevant?"

Assistant Professor Walid Jumblatt of Nanyang Technological University's Public Policy and Global Affairs Programme asked Mr Chan if it was possible to have the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee (EBRC) completely independent of the Prime Minister's Office.

He also suggested limiting the maximum size of group representation constituencies (GRCs) to two people. "If the intention is minority representation, we do not need more than two people," he said.

Mr Chan said the committee, formed last August and still working out the boundaries, is made up of public servants with knowledge of issues such as population and demographic changes.

"I have never doubted their independence. They do their job professionally," he said. "No matter who does the work, how it is done, you have to report to somebody and present it to be approved and issued," he said.

Mr Chan added that Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has already instructed the committee to reduce the average size of GRCs and create more single-member constituencies. "So, we have to wait for the EBRC's work to be done before we make any comments," he said.

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Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing, with Singapore Press Holdings' Chinese Media Group head Lee Huay Leng, who was moderating the dialogue yesterday, at the annual Singapore Perspectives conference, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies.
ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

Panellists discuss type of opposition Singaporeans want in local politics

Rei Kurohi

The type of opposition that Singaporeans want in local politics was among the issues observers discussed yesterday during a panel session on Singapore's political landscape.

The opposition's disunity is a reflection of the lack of consensus among voters about the kind of

political competition they want, said Ms Zuraidah Ibrahim, deputy executive editor of the South China Morning Post.

"Different voters are attracted to different types of opposition. Therefore, there is no single proven formula for both satisfying hardcore opposition voters while at the same time attracting swing voters, first-time voters and loyal PAP (People's Action Party) voters who may

be tempted to defect," said Ms Zuraidah, a former deputy editor of The Straits Times.

Academic Lam Peng Er, who was also on the panel at the conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies, said opposition parties here generally have not critiqued Singapore's fundamental core values, such as meritocracy and multiculturalism, that were established by the nation's founding fathers and con-

tinued to be espoused by the PAP.

"If you look at the Workers' Party (WP), it is a bluer shade of white," he quipped.

But if opposition parties can attract talent in greater numbers and offer a narrative which counters the ruling party's "hegemonic ideological discourse", it will be one of the more formidable challenges for the PAP, said Dr Lam, a senior research fellow at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

Ms Zuraidah said it is still unclear whether it would be best for opposition parties to position themselves as radically different from the ruling PAP or as "PAP-lite" and promise change at the margins.

The third panellist, veteran diplo-

mat Bilahari Kausikan, who chairs the Middle East Institute at NUS, warned that Singapore politics will not be exempt from global trends in geopolitics that are currently in a state of flux.

"Identity politics are already upon us, although usually not overtly labelled as identity politics. For example, lurking within debates about foreigners in our economy is really a claim of hierarchy," he said.

"Such claims are far too often not uncontaminated, much as those who make them may deny it, by claims of ethnic privilege."

This is just one example of issues that will surface within the next year as the general election draws



At yesterday's panel session on Singapore's political landscape were (from far left) South China Morning Post deputy executive editor Zuraidah Ibrahim; NUS senior research fellow Lam Peng Er; Yale-NUS College president Tan Tai Yong, who chaired the discussion; and Middle East Institute chairman Bilahari Kausikan.

ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

nearer, said Mr Bilahari, adding that feelings of insecurity about the future could make Singaporeans vulnerable to both "external and internal snake oil salesmen".

On the state of the opposition here, Ms Zuraidah said the WP – the most successful opposition party – has adopted a cautious approach that "infuriates more impatient opposition supporters".

The Singapore Democratic Party, which traditionally had a bolder and more distinct platform, has "consistently performed worse than the opposition average" under its current leader, Dr Chee Soon Juan, she said, adding: "It is not clear if this is because of its platform, its style of politicking or a

question of personality."

She described former PAP MP and central executive committee member Tan Cheng Bock's entry into opposition politics as "ground-breaking" and a "game changer", adding that it could pave the way for other "establishment types" to join the opposition.

But one obstacle for Dr Tan is the fact that many younger voters do not remember him from his time as an MP and recognise him only for his presidential bid in 2011, she said.

The panellists also fielded questions from the audience on various topics, including climate change and the Hong Kong protests.

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