

Dear politicians, this is how you get a millennial's vote

Younger Singaporeans want an MP who is active in Parliament, cares about climate change, and speaks up on public transport and jobs

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For *The Straits Times*

The Electoral Boundaries Review Committee (EBRC) report released on March 13 signals that the upcoming general election might be held sooner rather than later, perhaps earlier than the constitutional deadline of April 2021.

The next elections are significant for me, because I will be casting my virgin vote – provided my constituency has no walkover.

Finally, it is my turn to participate in the polls directly. But this also means my future is at stake, with issues to think through. I can't speak for my peers, many of whom will also be first-time voters. But I am sure many have similar concerns. Regardless of the side a politician is on, these are points to take note of from a 25-year-old millennial if he or she wants to get the vote.

ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN PARLIAMENT

I would like to have an MP who speaks up more in Parliament, and not just a handyman at Meet-the-People Sessions tackling

leaked pipes or appeals for parking fines. Many in the older generation look upon their MPs as grassroots figures who deal with municipal issues and pay little attention to their parliamentary performance.

But MPs are not just administrators in a town council; they are first and foremost a representative of the people. My ideal MP will be one who participates actively by asking the Government sharp questions, fighting for causes that matter and representing us by airing our views in Parliament.

I am not advocating for the MP to be adversarial but, instead, to be constructive. Better ideas and more information can be produced. In January, Workers' Party chief Pritam Singh asked in Parliament for the statistics of new jobs filled by Singaporeans, permanent residents (PRs) and foreigners respectively for each industry covered by the Industry Transformation Maps.

The question caused a kerfuffle, with Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing questioning the Aljunied GRC MP's agenda after he pressed for a breakdown of the 60,000 local jobs among Singaporeans and PRs. The

numbers were eventually revealed on Jan 16, which help us better understand the employment landscape. I wish my MP is as active as Mr Singh or Nee Soon GRC MP Louis Ng. Mr Ng spoke on 131 Bills and filed 235 parliamentary questions from January 2016 till the end of last year. This is in sharp contrast with my own backbencher MP who, according to my checks on Hansard, only spoke on nine Bills and asked 21 questions within the same time period.

ENGAGEMENT WITH THE YOUNG

Politicians should understand by now that an online footprint is important to engage young voters.

And that is why most of them have social media accounts (pro tip: Instagram is where most young people are). But are they using it right to engage Singaporeans?

For some, especially office-holders, their social media accounts feel more like a page that churns out press releases disguised as posts, with public relations-friendly pictures. I would be better off reading the newspapers. Worse, some MPs are inactive in posting social media updates, reducing their accounts to white elephants. These are

certainly not the best ways to engage young people.

There are, however, some politicians who utilise social media well. Tampines GRC MP Baey Yam Keng is one; he often invites followers on his Instagram to join him for runs. He also does a monthly live stream on Facebook and Instagram, where he chats with and answers questions from netizens.

THE ENVIRONMENT MATTERS

Many young people like me are now motivated to do more for the environment. Take a look at the climate rally held at Hong Lim Park last September, which drew more than 1,700 people. Many were young adults.

Climate change is an existential problem, yet not enough MPs are championing this in Parliament. Are they afraid of criticising polluting industries and offending relevant interest groups, since these industries contribute significantly to our gross domestic product?

But MPs should not fear. They should also not shy away from proposing harsh measures – such as a plastic bag levy or a tougher recycling regime – even though some Singaporeans may be unhappy with them. After all, our elected leaders often did what was right rather than popular, didn't they?

BREAD AND BUTTER ISSUES

But young people are practical too.

They want their MPs to lobby the Government and make a difference in bread and butter issues. After all, isn't this what basic governance is all about – providing citizens with a decent standard of living? For millennials my age, jobs and transport are pressing issues, since we are already working (or soon to be) and most of us take public transport daily.

According to a 2017 Maybank Kim Eng report, more millennials are working in the gig economy. So, how do MPs fight for the interests of this group of people, who are in a precarious position without long-term job security, robust health benefits or a stable income?

They also do not enjoy employer contributions to their Central Provident Fund accounts, effectively excluding themselves from a retirement safety net.

Full-timers are not spared either, as they worry about technological disruptions and potential retrenchments due to a bleak economic outlook arising from the global pandemic. On transport, younger Singaporeans seem to have fallen out of love with the car, not surprising given many are now more conscious about their carbon footprint. But that also means the Government must ensure the public transport infrastructure is in good shape, if young people are going to be more reliant on buses and trains. The responsibility lies with the backbenchers to speak up for us.

And now with the coronavirus pandemic, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has said that it will last at least through this year or even longer, and hinted that a snap election may be held so that a new government with a fresh mandate can be elected to tide the country over the crisis.

Most of us were primary schoolchildren during the last major virus outbreak from severe

acute respiratory syndrome in 2003. We remember little of what happened other than school closures, which as pupils we were very much happy about. But the impact now is palpable in my generation. Overseas studies and internship plans are thwarted, as are graduation trips.

Young people like me feel the pinch when trying to look for a job in this pessimistic climate, when many businesses are at risk, stagnating or scaling down.

We need a government that can not only handle the spread of the virus, but also manage recovery efforts effectively, especially where the economy and job market are concerned. While Singapore's initial efforts to control the outbreak were lauded internationally, the Government is now coming under fire because the virus is raging across foreign worker dormitories and local transmission cases have risen sharply. Its circuit breaker measures have also been criticised for being piecemeal, changing daily.

Meanwhile, while many Singaporeans and foreign residents have been fined for not observing social distancing rules, a People's Action Party MP who went around with a group distributing masks at a hawker centre has not faced enforcement action, leading to criticism that the "elite" are exempted from having to follow rules.

It has been over a month since the release of the EBRC report. If elections are to be held soon, there is not much time left for those running for office to take heed of these concerns if they want to capture the millennial vote.

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