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### For WP, the challenge of great expectations

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# For WP, the challenge of great expectations



The WP has the largest Opposition presence in the House since 1968. TODAY FILE PHOTO

EUGENE K B TAN



Notwithstanding the limitations Opposition parties face, the WP must be policy innovators — and not confine itself to being policy technicians tinkering at the edges.

The Workers' Party's (WP's) political stock is rapidly rising.

In the last 21 months, it has notched resounding electoral successes in the May 2011 General Election (GE), winning six elected seats (including five in Aljunied GRC, a first for any Opposition party); in the Hougang by-election in May last year; and most recently in Punggol East. With nine Members of Parliament (MPs), including two non-constituency MPs, the WP has the largest Opposition presence in the House since 1968.

The WP has established itself as the leading Opposition party, and a dominant one at that. It is seen as the vanguard of political change as we tread across the "new normal" to a "more normal" state of political affairs.

Naturally, growing expectations of the WP run the risk of ballooning to runaway expectations. Its supporters and critics alike expect the WP to punch above its weight in Parliament, even as the party was criticised during the Punggol East hustings for not doing enough.

However, voters felt otherwise, satisfied with the WP's tactical position as a check-and-balance against the People's Action Party (PAP) Government.

## TACTICALLY UNDER-PROMISING

In many ways, the WP has been able to capitalise on the fading lustre of one-party dominance, as well as on a growing demand for a healthy Opposition parliamentary presence as an enabler of good governance and to make the Government more responsive.

But now, flush with success, the WP has wasted no time in deftly managing growing expectations. Always tactically shrewd, the WP has indicated more than once that it is not ready to form an alternative government.

Secretary-General Low Thia Khiang said last Sunday that Singaporeans needed to give the incumbent Government time to work out the issues, and that the WP is prepared to cooperate where policies do benefit Singaporeans.

He also said that the results of the Punggol East by-election should not

be seen as a trend for the future. WP Chairman Sylvia Lim chimed in Monday that the party has to guard against being too embroiled in "parisan politics" and one-upmanship.

What can we make of these statements? They are pre-emptive and under-promising in nature. They will help the WP to temper expectations, buy time to sustainably grow the party and to shift the focus back to the PAP.

They also certainly seek to emphasise WP's moderate brand of politics that it is not out to throw the baby out with the bathwater. The WP is asserting that it engages in a "change and continuity" politics, that it does not pose for opposition's sake.

This message will help reassure those who are concerned with whether Singapore is ready for a non-PAP government. It also reaches out to non-WP supporters, especially those who prefer evolutionary, rather than revolutionary, political change.

## PRESENT REAL ALTERNATIVES

The WP is astute to recognise that Singapore is deeply imprinted with the PAP institutional template, and that the WP would not help its or Singapore's cause if it were to take over the reins of government when it is not ready. It also is acutely aware that, as the leading Opposition party, it needs to ramp up its policymaking expertise.

However, the WP needs to go beyond merely criticising policy flaws and raising parliamentary questions. The PAP MPs and Nominated MPs are ready to do that.

Not only must the WP go beyond manifesto-type policy prescriptions, it must also provide alternative policies that are not only viable but also realistic alternatives that are visionary, exciting and inspiring.

For example, it needs to craft policies that can not only deal with individual hot-button issues such as housing prices, transport woes, immigration, cost of — but also manage

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them in a holistic manner such that policy success in one area does not have the unintended consequence of creating problems in another.

Notwithstanding the policymaking limitations that Opposition parties typically face, the WP must be policy innovators — and not confine itself to being policy technicians tinkering at the edges.

It is easy to resist policy work, given that the WP is primarily assessed on its constituency work which it has been very diligent about — even to the extent of channelling the bulk of party resources to the Aljunied GRC at the expense of constituencies where it



Supporters and critics expect the WP to punch above its weight in Parliament. PHOTO: REUTERS



The WP will have to develop an operating system that will enable it to seriously challenge the PAP on the substance of policy ideas. In short, the WP has to win votes in its own right — rather than gain votes that are cast against the PAP.

## END OF THE HONEYMOON?

The WP is in an enviable position heading into the next GE. It is enjoying an extended political honeymoon but the electorate will, sooner or later, expect the party to challenge the PAP in a serious way.

Expectations are high, and if there is a false political dawn for the WP, can expect voters to turn against it with a vengeance. Such was the case for the Singapore Democratic Party when it won three seats in the 1991 GE but lost two of them in 1997.

Looking at the next GE, the WP would likely contest in no more than 40 per cent of the seats, primarily focusing on the eastern and north-eastern parts of the island in a geographically contiguous strategy. Not only will this strategy assure the growth somewhat, it can also help the party continue to gain political ground without prematurely removing the