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7-2017

### Parliament hearing a chance to bring closure to 38 Oxley Rd

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#### Citation

EUGENE, Tan K. B.. Parliament hearing a chance to bring closure to 38 Oxley Rd. (2017). *Today*. 1-4.  
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# Parliament hearing a chance to bring closure on 38 Oxley

BY

EUGENE K B TAN

July 2, 2017

In Parliament on Monday, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong will attempt to rebut the grave allegations on the conduct of his office and the integrity of the Government levelled by his younger siblings, Mr Lee Hsien Yang and Dr Lee Wei Ling.

What started ostensibly as a family dispute has transmogrified into probing concerns of governance and the rule of law. At the centre of the feud is the Lee family home at 38 Oxley Road. It is the clasp that intriguingly binds supposedly private family matters with the questions of good governance.

The allegations by the siblings are serious although they remain largely unsubstantiated. But because the stinging allegations come from the prime minister's own siblings, they have raised an element of doubt on the standing of the prime minister and the integrity of the government, which the opposition and critics of the government have not been able to do so all these years.

PM Lee and Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean have their work cut out for them. Their Ministerial Statements will have to convince Singaporeans that the allegations have no basis.

The parliamentary debate is also a concerted attempt to draw a line on the dispute so that future accusations cannot be laid against PM Lee and the Government by the opposition and critics.

Indirectly, the People's Action Party-dominated Parliament is under scrutiny too. Singaporeans expect Parliament to scrutinise PM Lee and his Government, robustly and without fear or favour.

Parliament has to ensure that Singapore and Singaporeans do not become losers, collateral damage in this bitter contest of wills.

How PM Lee (and the government) responds in Parliament on Monday and Tuesday will be closely watched, and will have to be beyond public reproach.

The debate will also be analysed and conclusions drawn by Singaporeans and other stakeholders based as much on what was said and answered and what was left unsaid and unanswered.

In the short-term, the unfolding saga has not significantly undermined public confidence and trust in the political leadership and the Government.

It boils down to the extant reservoir of trust and goodwill in the system and to a prime minister who is also personally popular.

But trust and confidence is not a given; it has to be nurtured and sustained or it will quickly dissipate.

The parliamentary debate will probably not resolve whatever concerns the PM Lee's siblings have, and they will almost certainly issue pointed counter-rebuttals in the days ahead. But the longer the public acrimony draws on, the longer-term impact on the political leadership, the Government and the ruling party could be detrimental.

Much of the public airing on the acrimony thus far has centred on whether Mr Lee Kuan Yew wavered in his belief that the house should be demolished after his passing.

This "preserve or demolish" dichotomy probably misses the point. The late Mr Lee perfectly understood that the Government can thwart his or any other person's testamentary wishes for the larger interest.

There is no doubt that 38 Oxley Road was an address that features prominently in the political history of independent Singapore. The address probably meets existing guidelines for preservation for its historic significance and national importance.

The basement dining room of the house was the venue of many pivotal meetings of the PAP pioneer stalwarts as they strove to take Singapore out of the yoke of British colonialism to independence.

Then there were the ordinary people from the trade unions and Chinese middle schools who sought out Mr Lee for legal advice at his home during the politically-charged 1950s.

Hence, the basement dining room is the most relevant for historical, national and social reasons. How Mr Lee Kuan Yew and his family lived in the other parts of the house is certainly not of national importance and none of our business. (If the house possesses unique and significant architectural merit, a replica could be made.)

As a relatively young nation, the government is of the view that the founding fathers' values, ethos, and spirit should be memorialised and transmitted to future generations.

The big question is how to. 38 Oxley Road is caught right smack in this state-initiated soul searching.

Singaporeans do not seem to have too much sentimentality towards the house; calls for its preservation only came amid and after the outpouring of grief when Mr Lee Kuan Yew passed away in March 2015.

In the same vein, Mr Lee Kuan Yew's estate and Singaporeans will object to the site being used in a manner that diminishes its intrinsic significance.

Preserving and maintaining the entire house on taxpayers' expense but making it off limits to visitors (as was Mr Lee Kuan Yew's wish if the house is not demolished) will not go down well with Singaporeans.

On the other hand, if we turn the house into a physical monument, we would have converted it to a secular relic to be venerated and held sacrosanct.

The life-giving values, resilient ethos, and indefatigable spirit of Mr Lee and the pioneer generation are best infused with permanence in Singaporeans. The temporal physical monumentality of the preserved house will fail abjectly at that.

Mr Lee Kuan Yew himself abhorred any notion of a cult of personality around him and hero worship. It also militates against the fundamental ethos and ethics of service to Singapore and Singaporeans.

Being fixated on the old house also severely reduces the significance of 38 Oxley Road. Instead, we should train our sights on how we can preserve the basement while demolishing the other parts of the house. DPM Teo has in his personal capacity floated such an "intermediate option".

The larger aim should be on how to creatively and sensitively use the plot of land at 38 Oxley Road to meaningfully interpret the values and legacy of the pioneers and to inspire Singaporeans.

Regardless of what transpires in parliament, there is significant public expectation not only for a reconciliatory closure to this bitter dispute but also how to move forward purposefully on the matter of 38 Oxley Road.

Notwithstanding the competing and contesting values impacting upon the options for the site, due process, transparency and accountability must be applied and seen to apply.

Ultimately, PM Lee and the government have to prevail in the court of public opinion. How they do so matters immensely to Singapore and Singaporeans.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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