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Much on the agenda in new term of Parliament

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ADDRESSING ASPIRATIONS, INTERESTS, FEARS POST SG50

Much on the agenda in new term of Parliament

EUGENE K B TAN



There will be several firsts when President Tony Tan Keng Yam opens the 13th Parliament's five-year term tomorrow.

It is the first Parliament without former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, who held a seat in the House for almost 60 years, between April 1955 and March 2015. Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Grace Fu is the first female Leader of the House. It is also the first time since the 5th Parliament (which sat between February 1981 and December 1984) that Parliament comprises Members from only two parties, namely the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) and the Workers' Party (WP).

We are now definitively in a post-Lee Kuan Yew era. Although Mr Lee resigned as Prime Minister in 1990, he continued to contribute immensely in Parliament and the Cabinet, and Singapore benefitted greatly from his stock of experience and expertise. As the nation's political leadership prepares in earnest to hand over power from the third to the fourth generation, Singaporeans will keenly observe how the 4G leadership governs Singapore in the next 10 to 15 years.

The 4G leaders will have to develop individual and collective identities and be able to win the confidence and trust of Singaporeans as the leadership transition substantially progresses further in the next few years.

The 13th Parliament is unlikely to be very different in substance from the 12th Parliament, notwithstanding the different electoral outcomes and fortunes for the PAP and WP in last September's General Election (GE). We can expect debates on contentious issues to be very much fought along PAP-WP partisan lines.

The PAP has 83 out of 89 parliamentary seats, or more than 90 per cent of the elected seats. With the unexpected strong electoral mandate in

last year's polls, the pressure is very much on PAP to deliver on its electoral promises and to govern well and inclusively while engaging closely with Singaporeans on major policy issues.

In contrast, there will arguably be lower public expectations of the WP.

Of course, the party will have to raise its game in Parliament as it seeks to redeem itself. The WP will have to show that it is more than a check on the PAP by coming up with clear, viable alternative policies. It cannot just be content with asking difficult questions in Parliament; while that is important, how does that differentiate the party from civil society?

The WP has to inspire the electorate through having its own legislative agenda rather than having one dictated to them. A strong and purposeful legislative showing will be to the WP's benefit. Conversely, a lacklustre performance this term could come with a cost at the next GE.

ECONOMY, TRANSPORT, INCOME GAP AMONG ISSUES

Parliament's immediate focus will be the economy. There will be the urgent need to ensure a successful transformation of the economy by 2020, with productivity and innovation being the defining features of the future economy.

Progress on these fronts has not been up to expectations. Time is of the essence, and the Committee on the Future Economy's work and recommendations will generate robust debate in Parliament while showcasing the 4G leadership's policymaking nous.

Other critical issues for Parliament to tackle include public transport, retirement funds adequacy, social mobility in light of the income and wealth gaps, and a revamp of the town council regulatory management system.

There will be the need to ensure the successful implementation of recent key policies, such as SkillsFuture, MediShield Life and the Silver Support Scheme.



President Tony Tan addressing MPs at the opening of the second session of the 12th Parliament in May 2014. Mr Lee Kuan Yew's absence from the parliamentary chamber will be profoundly felt. TODAY FILE PHOTO

Immigration remains a salient issue and it will come to the fore as the domestic (that is, Singaporean) workforce is expected to shrink for the first time around 2020. Further, in 2013, the Government had committed itself to a medium-term review of the controversial Population White Paper by 2020. With a third of the population expected to be aged 65 years and above by 2030, how we advance our preparations — not just in terms of infrastructure and a policy framework but also attitudes — for an ageing society will also be critical in the next five years.

Parliament may also have to tackle potential crises such as the global economy taking a prolonged downward turn and its impact on trade and investment-dependent Singapore.

What about a deteriorating regional situation that has an impact on regional peace and stability? The threat of terrorism and the implications for social cohesion cannot be excluded and will be closely watched as well.

TAPPING SINGAPORE'S COLLECTIVE WISDOM

The Government does not have the monopoly of wisdom on these issues. As such, how it taps Singapore's collective wisdom, garners appreciation and understanding for its policies, and mobilises popular support for major policies will determine the quality of Government and governance.

Ultimately, Parliament — as the lawmaking institution in our system of constitutional government — has to be the key platform for the articulation and debate of diverse views. Repre-

“The WP will have to show that it is more than a check on the PAP by coming up with clear, viable alternative policies. It cannot just be contented with asking difficult questions in Parliament; while that is important, how does that differentiate the party from civil society?”

sentation has been a foundational idea of political life since ancient times.

How well the 13th Parliament represents the interests, fears and aspirations of Singaporeans will be a yardstick by which legislative performance will be measured. This takes place against the backdrop of Singaporeans' growing democratic aspirations, increasing civic-political participation and demand for democratic ownership of governmental processes. Ignited by the momentous SG50 celebrations, the renewed vigour, passion and belief of Singaporeans should be harnessed to rise above the uncertainty and challenges in the next stage of nation-building.

Mr Lee Kuan Yew's absence from the parliamentary chamber, which was a key platform on which he himself had engaged Singaporeans and made many speeches, will be profoundly felt. He had recognised that even in a one-party-dominant system, nothing was to be taken for granted.

As he said in the House in 1999: “Make no mistake about this. In this Chamber, we are playing for keeps. The future of Singapore and its three-plus million people is not a question for light-hearted banter.”

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