

Empowered citizens or risk of free-for-all debates?

Some MPs want more voices; others, civil and informed debates

By **CHARISSA YONG**

WHILE some asked for citizens to be empowered, others warned of the dangers of free-for-all debates driven by misinformation.

As the House entered the second day of debate on the President's Address, constructive politics continued to be a running theme, with nine out of 17 MPs raising the issue yesterday.

Two camps of thought emerged, largely along party lines.

For the PAP MPs, keeping debates civil and informed is critical to constructive politics.

"Debate with words dripping with hate cannot possibly help.

"It may even cause a rupture in our social stability," said Ms

Lee Bee Wah (Nee Soon GRC) in Mandarin.

Social media, in particular, can derail constructive politics when many "insidious untruths" are spread online, said Mr Zainudin Nordin (Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC).

He singled out a segment of society which is "louder, more demanding and less willing to accommodate changes" as culprits who stoke distrust and hatred online.

Dr Teo Ho Pin (Bukit Panjang) said that such acts can have undesirable consequences in the governance and policy-making of a country, a view echoed by Associate Professor Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim (Nee Soon GRC).

Mr Edwin Tong (Moulmein-Kallang GRC) said the policies the Government has introduced in the last three years to

address concerns over housing, transport and health care, did not happen by chance.

"They happen because we have a Government committed to constructive politics of proactive consultation, robust debate, and then, most importantly, translating that debate into real tangible outcomes for Singaporeans. That, in a sense, is what each of us should be here for. Taking a position in a debate is a means, not an end," he said.

For the Workers' Party (WP) and Nominated MP Laurence Lien, constructive politics involve everyone in society and not only politicians.

"We can embrace a more deliberative form of democracy where there are authentic deliberations among representatives, meeting as equals," he said, adding that the creative energies of people should be harnessed, "even if they have a few sharp edges".

A wider market of voices was also embraced by

Non-Constituency MP Yee Jenn Jong of the WP, who called for political education in schools to teach students how to handle diversity and differences in opinions. "Such education programmes can help our future generation be more confident in dealing with the diversity of views in the public spaces."

Mr Yee's fellow Workers' Party NCMP Gerald Giam also noted that vigorous and passionate debates do not necessarily lead to gridlock and paralysis.

The converse is also bad – policies which are rushed through can cause much unhappiness and may have to be later reversed, he said.

"It would be much better to have a proper and informed debate, both inside and outside this House, make adjustment in response to feedback from MPs and the public, then roll out better schemes for Singaporeans."

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