

What it takes to keep the Govt on its toes

By Tham Yuen-c

PEOPLE have increasingly come to expect checks and balances in Parliament, believing that it can keep the Government on its toes, panellists at a Straits Times roundtable said. But whether the checks necessarily have to come from an opposition party was a point of contention between Workers' Party chairman Sylvia Lim and People's Action Party MP Hri Kumar Nair during a spirited discussion last Wednesday to discuss findings of a Straits Times survey.

Ms Lim said an opposition party would be able to vote against the Government in the House, as the WP has. And since the 2011 General Election, people have become more convinced that this has led to "better service" from the Government.

But Mr Nair countered that Workers' Party MPs had not taken a stand on many national issues, nor provided alternative views, and were less effective at challenging the Government than PAP backbenchers.

In the ST survey, the need for checks and balances on the Government was ranked very important by 35 per cent of those asked to rate the importance of six factors in their choice of MPs.

In contrast, fewer than 30 per cent of respondents had listed the other factors, including policies, candidate and party attributes, as very important.

Ms Lim, who is also WP chairman, was encouraged by the findings. They show that Singaporeans believe "institutions have to function with some sort of balance regardless of whether the policies are good or bad", she said.

Some voters have told her that they see policy changes in recent years as the PAP-led Government's response to its showing at the last election, in which the party lost a group representative constituency for the first time.

But Mr Nair said this was a misconception. Citing the example of ComCare - a fund to pay for social assistance schemes - he said the Government set it up about 10 years ago when it realised that pressure on Singaporeans, especially the low-income, would increase with globalisation, and this was way before the 2011 election.

And while he did not disagree with the need for an opposing voice in Parliament, he suggested it did not have to come from an opposition party. Instead, checks and balances can also be provided by MPs of the same party.

Effective checking of the Government, said Mr Nair, is not about going against the Government for the sake of opposition, but about providing alternative ideas and proposals.

Over the years, PAP members of the House have been doing so through raising questions in Parliament and proposing private member's Bills to deal with issues not addressed by the Cabinet, he said.

WP MPs, on the other hand, did not provide a diversity of views as they always toed the party line and also voted accordingly.

He said: "How many times have you heard a WP MP give a different view from the WP? Zero.

" A WP MP has never, in the time I've been in Parliament from 2006, stood up to say 'I'm taking a different position from my party'. So if you think our Whip is thick, theirs is thicker and theirs is obviously more painful."

But Ms Lim said this was a result of the party having far fewer members in the House. With only seven out of the total of 87 MPs, any contradiction between WP members could be taken as a sign of disunity and be used against the party, she said.

Besides, the WP had also voted as a party against government policies that it did not agree with, such as the White Paper on Population, Ms Lim noted.

PAP MPs, though, could not do the same even when they disagreed, she said, as they had to vote according to the party line. It is just that being the "juggernaut" in Parliament, the PAP could afford to let its members express alternative views and still push through its agenda, she added.

She said: "I don't think many people would be comfortable with the fact that you have a whole House full of MPs from one party no matter how much they talk... because in the end you know that the party Whip comes in and that's about it."

Nominated MP Eugene Tan, who was also on the panel, agreed. "I think there's a realisation that you can't have the party check itself, notwithstanding the various points that (Mr Nair) raised, he said.

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser said people's desire for checks and balances was motivated by their wanting to keep the Government on its toes, and not so much because of shortcomings in particular issues. "The man and woman in the street, they're not thinking of specific issues," he said.