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PAGES 2 & 3



Ministers refute allegations of arrogance

Opposition has no concrete examples, says Minister Shanmugam

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SINGAPORE — They have heard it before, and the People's Action Party leadership heard it again on the first night of election rallies.

Yesterday, six ministers responded in different ways — from sharp retorts to patient explanation — to the Opposition's charge that the PAP has become arrogant.

The strongest comeback was from Home Affairs and Law Minister K Shanmugam, who described it as "classic politics of negativity", with nothing to back it up.

"The people who say this — do they give any examples to back up what they mean? Or do they just hope to generally create and ride on some discontent? What do they mean by 'the Government is too arrogant'?" he shot back.

"I doubt very much if concrete examples were given. So, don't assume the accusation is correct and we have to defend."

Mr Gerald Giam, a Workers' Party candidate in East Coast Group Representation Constituency, had said on Thursday that 52 years in power has made the PAP "complacent and arrogant" and act as if it is "entitled" to voters' support.

To this, Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts Lui Tuck Yew said: "It's a word they always throw around — phrases and other descriptors. The people will decide whether we're arrogant or not, or whether we've been listening to them, understanding them, working with them.

"I think that's a better indicator. I won't take the words of the WP for whatever it's worth."

The recurring theme among the ministers as they spoke to TODAY was that consultation was well and truly alive within the PAP.

Environment and Water Resources Minister Yaacob Ibrahim said: "We know if we make one policy which is wrong, it's going to injure an entire generation. So we consult widely, we speak to a lot of people.

If there's a need for us to improve, we should work to improve. There must be no righteous attitude that we're by any means perfect. That would be absurd.

**Minister for Foreign Affairs
George Yeo**

"And, as mentioned by Mr Lui, if the WP has some idea which is a workable solution, they've never presented it. So I don't know who's arrogant at this point in time."

Indeed, at this point in time, the PAP is far more approachable than it was before, Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong said.

"Maybe in the past, there were issues to be resolved and, of course, there was no time to consult people and actions had to be taken," he said.

"In recent years, you'll find that every policy is openly discussed

... before we implement policies."

And the message from Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan is that the PAP will not rest on its laurels.

"We're never complacent. That's a statement of fact — that we have very good results, and we'll always work our guts out for the people. And I think that's what ... really counts," he said as he stressed that voters should ask if candidates are reliable and if the party's plans will benefit them.

Robust as some of the responses were, there was also recognition that there can be room to do better.

Foreign Affairs Minister George Yeo struck the conciliatory note when he said he was "aware of this criticism of the PAP".

"It's always good to have feedback and sometimes feedback may be hard on the ears but, very often, that would be the most important feedback," he said.

"If there's a need for us to improve, we should work to improve. There must be no righteous attitude that we're by any means perfect. That would be absurd."

He added that it was also important, when "discussing the issue of arrogance and the issue of failings of the Government, to take a step back and look at the overall picture of how Singapore is doing", objectively and by "international standards".

"When we do that we'll see things in perspective," he said.

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NWC calls for higher wage hikes

Panel also says special one-off payment will help workers cope with inflation

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SINGAPORE — A day after People's Action Party (PAP) leaders warned of "dark clouds" ahead in the volatile external environment, the National Wages Council (NWC) has come out to issue its clearest call for wage hikes since the 1990s.

Its guidelines released yesterday recommended that employers give out higher wage increases in line with the strong economic recovery and that they make special one-off payments to help employees cope with the rising cost of living.

After Singapore's record 14.5 per cent economic growth last year, the NWC said employers should give back to their employees. Depending on each company's situation, employers can make greater use of variable payments — instead of higher built-in wages — to reward employees, it said. As in previous years, it urged companies to better benefit low-income workers by including a dollar quantum.

The NWC added that, in wage negotiations, companies and unions should take into account the hike in the employers' CPF contribution rate and CPF salary ceiling in September this year.

The 2011/2012 guidelines were endorsed yesterday by the Government, the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) and the Singapore National Employers Federation.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at an election rally last night described the NWC's call as "good news for everybody".

In its statement, the Government said that last year's exceptional growth, the healthy pace of expansion — reckoned at 8.5 per cent — in the first quarter this year, and the projected full-year growth of 4 to 6 per cent, made the call for wage hikes possible.

Notably, on Thursday night, Mr Lee had warned in the PAP's political broadcast of seeing "dark clouds on the horizon" — the Middle East upheavals, the disaster in Japan, Europe's debt woes, a crisis in United States government finances, and the extremist challenge to Singapore's neighbours. "All these could impact our growth, stability and security," he had said.

For now, analysts say, it would not be difficult for companies to raise wages given the robust economic outlook for the year — and especially after data released yesterday showed Singapore's unemployment rate had fallen to a three-year low of 1.9 per cent in the first quarter, from 2.2 per cent in the preceding quarter.

Mr Song Seng Wun, regional economist at brokerage CIMB, said there was certainly more room for some businesses to be generous with their pay packages.

In supporting the NWC guidelines, the NTUC said this was "the right time to reward workers with higher wage increases".

As labour productivity grew 11 per cent last year, reversing the 3.4 per cent decline of 2009, the NWC added that wage increases should lag productivity growth in order to be sustainable. NTUC assistant secretary-general Josephine Teo said the labour movement would continue to work with employers to raise worker productivity.

Manpower Minister Gan Kim Yong, who urged employers to take into account the NWC recommendations as they reviewed wages for the year ahead, said: "Employers, together with workers and the Government, should press on with efforts to raise productivity for sustainable wage growth in the long term."