

Ridout Rd saga: Thorough airing of issues shows premium placed on integrity

There was recognition that queries about the matter were valid and these were addressed in detail.

Gillian Koh

Parliament spent six hours on Monday discussing the ministerial statements on how two members of Singapore's Cabinet came to rent state-owned, conserved heritage bungalows.

Several of its 12 opposition politicians sought clarifications on how the combined actions of ministers, civil servants and private sector intermediaries upheld codes and norms of state and commercial probity. They heard senior members of the front bench respond and commit to strengthening policies to keep government clean and fair.

It was an important exercise in democratic governance which we should encourage more of. How was this the case, and what role do citizens and civil society play in the maturation of our political system? Consider these three points.

First, all the key elements of the political system operated as they should, with both the political and legal processes activated thoroughly.

We know this was about addressing queries first raised by opposition politician Kenneth Jeyaretnam about whether proper processes were followed, and market rates were paid by Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam and Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan in renting properties managed by the Singapore Land Authority (SLA) – a statutory board that falls under the purview of the former.

Mr Jeyaretnam's May 6 blog post sought the facts of the process but was also laced with the innuendo about how the ministers could afford the rent, which would presumably be rather costly. Alternative media,

as well as netizens, posed further queries on the matter. Some presumed there had been an abuse of power and some raised quieter and more incisive questions about actual, potential and perceived conflicts of interest around the rentals and the way the Government was addressing the issue.

SLA issued an early statement with some basic facts on May 12. "More details on this issue will be provided during the next parliamentary session in July 2023," it added, recognising the appropriate forum to address the matter and committing to a schedule that the Government would work towards.

CPIB STEPS IN

The big surprise, as revealed on June 28, was the fact that Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had already, by May 17, instructed the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) to get on the job.

An organ of the state that has built its reputation around not letting even the big fish get away with corruption, one with the appropriate powers to commandeer all the necessary information, summon all the parties involved, and tie them down to the legal obligation to providing the facts and the truth, the CPIB is well known as a critical and authoritative defender of integrity across the country. It was therefore right that CPIB investigated and then took its report to the Attorney-General's Chambers to complete that process of legal oversight.

It was also important that a review of policy and bureaucratic action was conducted by a senior member of the Government. The question as to whether Senior Minister Teo Chee Hean was the right man for the job, given that he was the reporting and investigating officer, was also thoroughly aired in Parliament this week. The discussions that have arisen will now probably help to refine these internal

review processes going forward, but in this case, it was clarified that SM Teo had not been called to act on the matter at all before the investigation began.

Second, there was recognition that the queries were not illegitimate, and were addressed to foster detailed deliberation. How Mr Shanmugam approached the discussion in Parliament was significant. Whereas in an earlier era, the default communications position of government leaders was that questioning their probity undermined their authority, the Law Minister's opening statements struck a different note.

He said he was conscious that as an elected official, he was held to a higher standard of accountability and that the issues of financial probity were critical to the governance system of the country. In other words, while he had said previously that the allegations against him were outrageous, he understood the validity of the inquiry, and would respond. His caveat: Leave his family out of it. But even then, he also responded to queries on whether his son had commercial interests in the matter. The answer: no.

DETAILED OPEN DISCUSSION

There was open discussion and a patient, repeated clarification of parliamentary questions by him and his colleagues, as well as Mr Edwin Tong speaking in his capacity as Second Minister at the Law Ministry, specifically on the details of the policies and actions relating to the management of black-and-white colonial bungalows.

This is par for the course in not just parliamentary democracy, but one set in a country that places a premium on integrity and incorruptibility in government. Politics matters. Hardball politics and the intimidating threat of defamation suits, which would have accompanied such questioning of

leaders in the past, seem to have receded. The facts and argumentation now have room to surface. The quality of deliberation can emerge and be judged.

What is even more important are SM Teo's statements that the Public Service Division will now introduce standard declaration requirements for the group of officers who are involved in leasing and evaluation matters, who have privileged information and are involved in transactions to do with state property – from black-and-white bungalows right down to hawker and market stalls. He also said the Prime Minister would review the declarations required for property transactions for ministers and People's Action Party MPs. This is a system that learns.

Third, in raising the questions, citizens and civil society play the most important part in this system and must continue to. This was also acknowledged in the CPIB and SM Teo's reports, and reiterated in Parliament. Facts were sought from the relevant authorities and also the personalities involved, with the starting point that integrity, honesty and the notion of one rule for everyone are the bedrock of Singapore's political system.

In this process of democratic deliberation, parliamentarians, citizens and activists know that open and rigorously tested facts are the currency by which their positions on politics, policy, community and the welfare of the country are established. What should their perceptions be based on then but the facts of the case, and how political leaders express the motivations behind what they do.

Since the CPIB and SM Teo's reports were made known, some netizens are satisfied that there has not been an abuse of power and corruption. Perhaps more will understand that SLA's list of properties for rent cannot be secret because it is in the business of renting them. This is

information that is public, in the hands of marketing agents and in good marketing conditions, fully available online, as is now the case.

Perhaps more will believe that the ministers did not operate using privileged information or receive privileged treatment at the material time of the rentals as what was explained filters out to the body politic.

ROLE OF CITIZENS

As our economy has become more complex and corporate governance more sophisticated, citizens will be more exposed to the disciplines of avoiding conflicts of interest through their workplaces.

Citizens will be equally vigorous in calling out instances when governance goes awry. They will also know the pain of being misperceived and how a fair-minded reception of facts brings due relief.

We know that our civic and democratic posture must be that our perceptions can and must be reshaped by the facts and plausible explanations of policy. There is little benefit in reserving a right to be indignant, even in the face of new knowledge, regardless of whether it is from the men in white, blue or yellow, or organs of the state.

Overall, our parliamentarians today and those to come, have been put on notice – that good governance continues to matter greatly, and the leaders on both sides of the House have set standards for themselves that we will hold them to. They have done that through their questions and explanations.

This episode shows how we all contribute to strengthening governance and democracy as the demands for these can only grow stronger as we look ahead.

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