

Cabinet had robust discussions when devising the elected presidency,

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Cabinet ministers had robust and candid discussions when coming up with novel laws such as the elected presidency and group representation constituency (GRC) schemes, said former deputy prime minister S. Jayakumar.

Various options and angles are explored by the ministers, and different perspectives are heard before a final decision is made for all major policies and laws, said Jayakumar, 87, who was also law minister during his 31-year-long political career.

Through his new book, he gave readers a glimpse of the debate behind these laws that had not been made public previously.

The processes behind these two laws, along with the Non-Constituency MP scheme, are the subject of the book *Creating Three Unique Singapore Laws: An Inside Story* by Jayakumar, launched on Aug 12.

"In government, before the die is cast, and you announce the law, announce the policy, all possible options ought to be looked at," he said in an interview with *The Straits Times* and *Lianhe Zaobao* on Aug 5.

"For sound decision-making, you have got to explore all angles before the final decision is reached."

He hopes that the book will help readers understand that there is a "fairly detailed discussion of important issues, (which) might give them some sense of comfort that things are not rushed through at a railroad speed".

The former minister, who joined politics in 1980, was involved in the process of developing all three laws from conception to enactment.

Jayakumar acknowledged that the laws were deemed "controversial" and said: "I will be the first one to admit that all three, at various stages, different opposition quarters said it was to fix the opposition."

But the specific mechanics of the laws are not sacrosanct and can be



Former deputy prime minister S. Jayakumar speaking with *The Straits Times* and *Lianhe Zaobao* on Aug 5 at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. When he first joined Cabinet, the robustness of the discussions left an imprint, he said. He hopes his new book will help readers understand that there is a "fairly detailed discussion of important issues" and "things are not rushed through at a railroad speed". ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

adapted by future generations, he said.

What matters, he added, is whether people agree on the underlying doctrines of the laws.

In the case of the elected presidency, it is the need to provide a custodial check on the Government's power to spend the reserves and make key public appointments.

The GRC and NCMP schemes are to guarantee minority and opposition representation in Parliament, respectively, he added.

If there is agreement on these underlying doctrines, then the laws should be seen as the "modalities" arrived at to address these problems, he said.

If future generations feel the laws are not the appropriate mech-

anism, then they may come up with something else, said Jayakumar.

However, these laws are still relevant today, he said when asked.

The elected presidency was enacted in 1991, while the NCMP scheme was enacted in 1984 and the GRC scheme in 1988 – all years after they were first discussed in various forms around 1981 and 1982.

His new book, published by *Straits Times Press*, elaborates on how the ministers disagreed, discussed and came to a consensus when forming these laws, through his own recounts of what happened then, supported by newly declassified Cabinet papers.

Jayakumar said that when he first joined Cabinet, the robustness of the discussions fascinated him and

left an imprint.

"I had not known the depth of details which ministers discuss," said Jayakumar, who was an academic at the National University of Singapore Faculty of Law before entering politics.

He was minister of state for home affairs and law in late 1981 when he was asked to look into possible constitutional safeguards that would protect Singapore's reserves from a profligate government.

Then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew had broached the idea of what would eventually become the elected presidency.

There was a perception by the public and people not in government that Lee was someone who brooked no dissent, but he was instead very prepared to engage in

discussions with the younger ministers, hear what they had to say, and was even prepared to change his mind, Jayakumar said.

Under Lee's first conception of the elected presidency, the president would be a "wicket-keeper" with very wide powers, including dissolving Parliament, holding a national referendum and declaring a state of emergency.

The eventual law was vastly different from Lee's initial proposal and came after robust debate, with many of the younger ministers pushing back on the original proposal, Jayakumar recounted in his book.

Quite a few of the younger ministers had, in fact, proposed alternative methods of protecting the reserves, such as having an upper

house or an independent central bank, he said.

Eventually, the scheme set out that an elected president would have veto powers over the withdrawal of Singapore's financial reserves and over the appointments of key positions in the civil service, government companies and statutory boards.

The same collegiate approach to decision-making – encouraging people to speak up and to question – continued in subsequent Cabinets with different PMs, said Jayakumar, who also served in the Cabinets of Goh Chok Tong and Lee Hsien Loong, Singapore's second and third prime ministers, respectively.

Goh also introduced another layer, a pre-Cabinet meeting where