

Speaker Palmer resigns over affair

Workers' Party urges by-election in vacated Punggol East seat

By **CAI HAOXIANG**

[SINGAPORE] Speaker of Parliament and People's Action Party (PAP) MP Michael Palmer resigned yesterday after confessing to an extramarital affair, sparking speculation on whether a by-election will be called to fill his vacated Punggol East seat.

The Workers' Party, which garnered a 41 per cent vote share in the ward in the 2011 general election, immediately urged Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to call a by-election as soon as possible. It said the party was "ready to offer a choice" again to the ward's 33,000 voters.

Mr Palmer, a married 44-year-old father of one, announced his resignation from the PAP and from his parliamentary post at a press conference yesterday afternoon.

Looking down and reading from a prepared script, Mr Palmer admitted tersely to having a "relationship" with a People's Association member. The woman was later identified by the PA as Ms Laura Ong, a constituency director from the Pasir Ris West constituency office.

"My conduct was improper and it was a serious error of judgment. I have resigned in order to avoid further embarrassment to the PAP and to Parliament," he said.

Asked if a by-election for Punggol East will now take place, Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean said that was a matter for PM Lee to decide.

Mr Lee weighed in with a Facebook post yesterday night. He said his first priority is to make sure Punggol East residents continue to be well taken care of.

He said Singapore also has several ongoing national issues, such as the Singapore Conversation on the country's future, a White Paper on population to be debated in Parliament next month, and next year's Budget.

"I will carefully consider whether to call a by-election in Pung-



The other woman: A file photo from March 25, 2010, showing Laura Ong at the People's Association quality service day event. Ms Ong is understood to be the woman whom former House Speaker Michael Palmer had an extra-marital affair with. PHOTOS: RAJ NADARAJAN AND MUGILAN RAJASEGERAN/THE STRAITS TIMES

gol East and, if so, when. I assure Singaporeans that I will make my decision based on what is best for the constituents of Punggol East and the country."

Mr Lee said he accepted Mr Palmer's resignation "with great sadness". "He has worked hard as an MP and been a good Speaker. But all MPs and grassroots advisers must uphold high standards of propriety and personal conduct, especially when dealing with constituents, activists, and staff," he said.

Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan pointed to a recent High Court ruling in August which noted that there was no requirement in the Constitution that the PM was required to call a by-election to fill a vacancy.

Veteran opposition politician Wong Wee Nam said a by-election might not be called "unless there is tremendous pressure from the people". He said it would be unfair if residents from a single-seat ward do not have an MP to represent them.

Meanwhile, Singapore Democratic Alliance's secretary-general Desmond Lim, who lost his \$16,000 election deposit in the three-cornered 2011 Punggol East fight with the WP and the PAP, was coy about his plans, say-

ing they will be known on Nomination Day.

Mr Teo was present with Mr Palmer at yesterday's press conference, which lasted only 15 minutes. He said the PAP dealt with the matter decisively and openly.

The party first knew about the matter on Saturday, Dec 8. Mr Palmer met him on Saturday night and said he would resign, Mr Teo said.

On Sunday morning, Mr Lee met with Mr Palmer and confirmed the decision. The party then spent two days making arrangements for the transition before making the announcement yesterday, Mr Teo said. Mr Lee will nominate the new Speaker when Parliament next meets in January. Deputy Speaker Charles Chong will be Acting Speaker meanwhile.

Minister of State and Mayor Teo Ser Luck will oversee Punggol East for now. "We will ensure a smooth transition. I'm doing it as we speak," he said when contacted yesterday.

The People's Association (PA) oversees grassroots organisations in Singapore. It aims to promote racial harmony and social cohesion. PA leaders and activists work closely with MPs, and some grassroots leaders are also PAP branch activists. DPM Teo said

that the PA member involved in the affair has resigned. "PA expects its staff members to maintain the highest standards of personal behaviour and conduct. And in this case, the staff member has fallen short," he said. In a statement last night, PA said Ms Ong tendered her resignation on Monday, citing family commitments. A spokesman added that the PA has accepted her resignation.

DPM Teo apologised on behalf of the PAP and himself for letting Punggol East residents down, and said they will "put things right" and continue to look after them.

At yesterday's press conference, Mr Palmer, who is a partner of law firm Harry Elias Partnership LLP, did not elaborate on the affair. Asked why he came forward, he said he has to take full responsibility for his mistake and will "leave it at that".

On whether he will go back to his legal work, Mr Palmer said: "At this stage I think there's a lot more for me to concentrate on ... as I said it's a time of privacy for my family, and I hope that you can respect that."

Philip Fong, managing partner of Harry Elias, told BT that Mr Palmer has been with the firm for more than 10 years and is not

on a leave of absence. "There's no question about Michael's professionalism in carrying out his duties. There is no change in his role and position in the firm. He and his family have our full support during this difficult time," he said.

Grassroots leaders and MPs were saddened and surprised by Mr Palmer's affair and resignation. They said they were only told yesterday and some heard it through the news. Former Punggol South branch secretary Caleb Tan said: "I'm shocked to hear of this. He is a nice man, a nice MP."

Fellow Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC MP Zainal Sapari, who will take over Mr Palmer as the new chairman of Pasir Ris-Punggol Town Council, told BT that there were no rumours about anything improper about Mr Palmer prior to his resignation. "I've found him to be very professional, impartial," he said.

Mr Palmer's resignation caps a year which started with the opposition Workers' Party dramatically sacking its own MP for Hougang, Yaw Shin Leong, in February for his silence over alleged extramarital affairs.

A by-election for Mr Yaw's Hougang ward was subsequently called at the end of May. The WP won with 62 per cent of the votes.