



TRIUMPH: Ms Lee Li Lian at the press conference after her win was announced.

THE BIG WIN

Cheers for heartland 'Ah Lian'

WP's Lee Li Lian feels the love with 54.52% of votes

They cheered for Ms Lee Li Lian at Hougang Avenue 5 as the Punggol East by-election result was announced last night.

Yells of "Ah Lian! Ah Lian!" resonated as hundreds gathered to cheer the Workers' Party (WP) candidate.

They were echoes of "Huat Ah!" that greeted Mr Png Eng Huat's victory in the Hougang by-election last May. Mr Png is also a member of WP.

Describing herself as a heartlander, Ms Lee won with more than 54 per cent of the votes. Amid the cheers were shouts of "thank you Michael Palmer".

Mr Palmer had vacated the seat after he resigned from the People's Action Party (PAP) following revelations of an extra-marital affair with a grassroots worker.

In the end, Ms Lee beat PAP's candidate Dr Koh Poh Koon to become the first woman opposition politician to win a Single Member Constituency seat since independence.

WP chairman Sylvia Lim said last night at a press conference: "We hope that this campaign will also encourage more women to come forward and enter political life."

"As Li Lian has shown, women can fight alongside men and in addition, contribute a fresh perspective and style."

WP won the by-election yesterday with close to 54.5 per cent of valid votes cast while PAP secured 43.7 per cent.

With Ms Lee's win, WP will have nine members in Parliament. In 2006, only party chief Low Thia Khiang and Ms Lim were there.

In a statement last night, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong congratulated Ms Lee.

"The PAP fielded a good candidate: Dr Koh Poh Koon," he said.

"He showed character and courage in contesting this election, and did the PAP proud. Clearly, many voters were impressed by Dr Koh's sincerity and commitment."

"But unfortunately, there were not enough of them for him to win."

Singapore Management University assistant professor Eu-



JUBILANT: (Above) Workers' Party supporters drumming up support in a coffee shop. (Right) Another WP fan holding up a copy of last May's The New Paper on Sunday when WP's Png Eng Huat won the Hougang by-election.

gene Tan said: "The result adds another feather to WP's cap."

"It can walk with more swagger in front of the rest of the opposition as WP has shown that it can sway the ground."

The rise of WP means it is "well-positioned to make further inroads in the next GE", Prof Tan added. "And naturally, the other opposition parties would be concerned about being overwhelmed by the WP juggernaut."

WP's Ms Lim also alluded to her party's growing influence in her speech last night.

"The impact of our campaign has been felt on the ground, with the PAP ministers and MPs scrambling to react up to the eleventh hour," she said.

"This is also an important episode for Singaporeans to take note of - the value of political competition in getting the Government to sit up and take notice."

But she acknowledged that the WP is "still a small party with much to do and improve upon".

The results leave the other contenders far behind: Reform Party's chief, Mr Kenneth Jeyaretnam, netted 1.2 per cent and the Singapore Democratic Alliance's secretary-general, Mr Desmond Lim, managed 0.57 per cent of the vote.

What is WP's appeal?

National University of Singapore political science lecturer Bilveer Singh said: "WP is credible, has good leaders old and new, has good policies, good ground support and volunteers."

"They appear sincere and hard-working. The public is willing to trust them. I believe the WP will improve its performance in the coming GE."

Political commentator and former Nominated

Member of Parliament Siew Kum Hong said the win cements WP's position as the leading opposition party.

He added: "WP already unveiled new members who seem to have good credentials (during their rallies) and the party will attract even more talent (in the days ahead)."

"Other opposition parties will find it correspondingly harder to attract talent compared to WP."

The new members introduced were National University of Singapore sociologist Daniel Goh, 40, lawyers Terence Tan and Dennis Tan, and engineer Redzwan Hafidz Abdul Razak.

Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean said last night after the results were announced that it was always going to be a tough by-election.

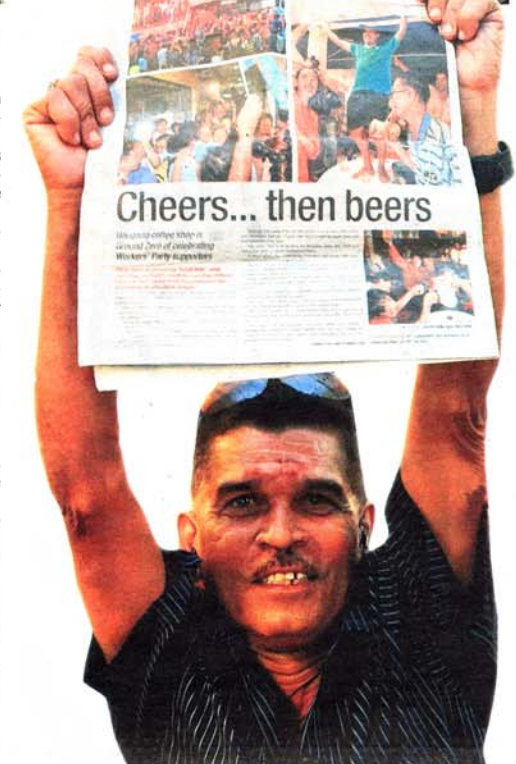
And voters plumped for WP, in the by-election, as a form of PAP-lite, said opposition veteran Wong Wee Nam.

"The results show people still subconsciously like the PAP, but don't want to change the system too much. So they go for WP to show there should be some opposition to the PAP."

He added: "The voters have nothing much to lose. They don't want to throw out the PAP, but they want to send a message that the incumbent party's policies have not benefited them and they're not happy."

The constituency is made up of middle-class and upper middle-class families with six in 10 living in five-room and executive flats, and private accommodation.

A five-room flat bought in 1998 for \$230,000 has



doubled in value there.

But the WP message - that it acts as a check-and-balance to the PAP Government - also gained traction with voters.

Said Prof Tan: "Voters have internalised the message that good governance means not putting all your eggs in one basket (or having one party in power)."

"You also need checks and balances - and they found a viable form of checks and balance in WP."

The PAP would need to continue working hard to address the issues causing this unhappiness, Mr Siew said.

These issues would be housing, transport, medical costs, immigration and the widening income gap.

On the local front: The lack of childcare facilities, Rivervale Plaza's stalled upgrading and simple things like the lack of halal eateries, which the WP was able to punch holes in, said National University of Singapore political science lecturer Bilveer Singh.

Prof Tan said WP's rallies allowed its message - that having a strong opposition would ultimately benefit Singaporeans - to reach a far wider audience.

It first mentioned the need for a strong opposition on Tuesday and reiterated the point on Wednesday, so it built up to a crescendo.

WP also didn't come across as a one-trick pony.

It raised issues like Aim (where town councils sold computer software to the PAP-owned company) strategically.

And when WP withdrew the motion to debate the matter in Parliament before the by-election, Prof Tan said it prevented the PAP from using the hustings to explain its side of the issue.

The PAP didn't engage WP on Aim at all during the hustings.

Mr Sabnani said PM Lee gave a good rally speech on the last day of campaigning, where he outlined the "big picture" and pledged to secure a good future for Singaporeans.

But while some people who were undecided on

who to vote could have been influenced by it, these numbers would have been few as "one speech does not change people's minds", said Mr Sabnani.

Instead, the fiasco involving Mr Palmer was cemented in people's minds, he said.

He added: "Such a win would also mean the voting population wants WP to be a major opposition in Parliament - that its policies and approaches have a large support base in many areas of the island."

And Mr Tan expects the party to do that by focusing on constituency work, like what it did after winning Aljunied GRC in 2011.

So a lacklustre performance in Parliament may not matter much to voters.

Said Prof Tan: "WP knows what really works is to plug away at the grassroots level."

"Turning in a good report card for constituency work is more effective than giving fiery Parliament speeches, which not many people will pay attention to."

"It knows people don't have the bandwidth to process complicated policy arguments."

REPORTS: KOH HUI THENG, ESTHER NG, JUDITH TAN, RENNIE WHANG, THEODORA D'CRUZ, CELINE CHEN, ELIZABETH LAW, AUDREY TAN, KERRI HENG, NATHANIEL HONG

PICTURES: JONATHAN CHOO, GARY GOH

| SCORECARD | SCORECARD | SCORECARD | SCORECARD |
|--|--|--|---|
|  Lee Li Lian, 34 2013 Votes: 16,038 54.52% 2011 Votes: 12,777 41.01% |  Dr Koh Poh Koon, 40 2013 Votes: 12,856 43.71% 2011: Michael Palmer Votes: 16,994 54.54% |  Desmond Lim, 45 2013 Votes: 168 0.57% 2011 Votes: 1,387 4.45% |  Kenneth Jeyaretnam, 53 2013 Votes: 353 1.20% Total votes: 29,832 Split votes: 2013 2011 417 551 |