

# SDP eyes vacant Punggol seat

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**SINGAPORE** – In an unprecedented show of interest by political parties in a single-seat ward, the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) yesterday became the latest to declare its intention to contest the Punggol East Single Member Constituency — setting the stage for a five-way fight, if and when a by-election is called.

Unsurprised by the huge interest, political analysts were quick to note how, unlike Hougang, which saw a straight fight between the People's Action Party (PAP) and the Workers' Party (WP) in its recent by-election, the Punggol East ward — newly carved out in the General Election (GE) last year — is primed for a "free-for-all" contest.

Former Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) Siew Kum Hong said: "Hougang was a long-time WP stronghold. It would have

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**Asst Prof Eugene Tan**  
 NOMINATED MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT

been more indefensible for other opposition parties to go and contest. Punggol East, however, is open game for everyone.”

The circumstances under which the seat was vacated also come into play. Said NMP Eugene Tan: "It's the first time where a PAP-held ward has been vacated on less-than-happy terms — it's one rare occasion where it's on the defensive."

Punggol East was previously helmed by former PAP MP and Speaker of Parliament Michael Palmer. Mr Palmer resigned earlier this month after admitting to an extramarital affair.

Assistant Professor Tan, a law academic from Singapore Management University, added: "It's as good a chance as they can get in creating awareness of their party and make political hay. Punggol East also has a younger demographic profile which opposition parties generally assess to be likely more open to political courtship."

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Mr Palmer had won the 2011 GE with 54.5 per cent of the votes. WP candidate Lee Li Lian received 41.4 per cent, while Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA) candidate Desmond Lim garnered 4.5 per cent.

This time around, the Reform Party, SDA, SDP and WP have all declared their interest in contesting Punggol East — even though Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said last week that he was still "seriously considering" whether to hold a by-election. It could even be a six-way contest if former Singapore People's Party candidate Benjamin Pwee throws in his hat as an independent candidate. Mr Pwee had told the media he is in talks with various opposition parties, with an eye on contesting the ward.

Dr Tan Ern Ser from the National University of Singapore said the opposition parties would also be "inter-

ested to know how they fare relative to one another" in preparation for the next GE, due by 2016.

"Even if they do not win, a by-election provides an opportunity to test the waters," he added.

Political analysts also felt that the contesting opposition parties would exploit the by-election, if it is called, to bring national issues to the fore.

Said Mr Siew: "The impression was that Mr Palmer had taken care of the residents there well so you can't fight on local issues."

Asst Prof Tan added: "A lot of the hot-button issues during the General Election last year, such as transport and cost of living, remain fairly attractive lightning rods today and I suppose still provide a fertile terrain to rally support."

A local issue that is still unresolved, however, is upgrading work at Rivervale Plaza. Renovations stalled after the contractor went bust but North East District Mayor Teo Ser Luck, who has been tasked to oversee the Punggol East ward, has since said work will be completed in June next year.

SDP Secretary-General Chee Soon Juan said his party has not decided who to field. Nevertheless, he noted



SDP Secretary-General Chee Soon Juan (right) and Chairman Jufrie Mahmood at a media conference held yesterday. PHOTO: OOI BOON KEONG

that he is ineligible to run because of a five-year ban under electoral rules for a fine in 2010.

He also made clear that the SDP will use the by-election to raise national issues such as healthcare and housing.

"For the longest time, the Opposition has been criticised for throwing stones, for not being able to come up with solutions and that's why we have invested much of our effort and

time into coming up with these concrete policies and I'm very sure that the voters would want this choice; being able to see what an alternative is," he said.

While the party has not been active in the ward, Dr Chee noted that the SDP had contested in the non-defunct Punggol SMC in 1988 and garnered 40 per cent of the votes — however its electoral boundaries are significantly different to Punggol East's.