



# When a private indiscretion... ...turns into a very public issue



Mr Michael Palmer had an affair, but he also performed his duties as Speaker and MP diligently. So why did a personal mistake have to cut short his public career? **Insight** weighs the arguments.

By RACHEL CHANG and TESSA WONG

IN FORMER Speaker of Parliament Michael Palmer's statement of resignation, one sentence stands out for its departure from the contrite tone of the rest of the text.

In the fifth of the eight-paragraph text, Mr Palmer said: "I have performed my duties as Speaker of Parliament and MP for Punggol East to the best of my ability and my actions did not affect my performance of those duties."

That his personal indiscretions had not detracted from his seven years of public service, which Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong characterised as "tireless", was emphasised not just by Mr Palmer but People's Action Party (PAP) leaders as well.

But, said Mr Teo, resignation was still the "proper" thing to do because of the PAP's requirement that its MPs uphold the highest standards of personal conduct.

Other observers had a different take on why Mr Palmer had to resign once his affair became public knowledge.

As former National Solidarity Party secretary-general Goh Meng Song says, referring to the former Workers' Party MP: "Yaw Shin Leong has set a precedent. You cheat, you have to go."

### The Yaw factor

MR PALMER'S fall from grace caps this year's slew of sex scandals. Before news of his affair with People's Association staff member Laura Ong broke, there was former Hougang MP Yaw Shin Leong's expulsion from the Workers Party (WP) in February.

As rumours of an affair circulated online, Mr Yaw ignored repeated requests from the WP leadership to attend meetings to discuss his conduct. They finally expelled him for failing to live up to the party's standards of transparency and accountability.

Mr Yaw fled the country soon after, and is still unaccounted for.

His vacant seat triggered a by-election in Hougang in May, which the WP candidate, Mr Png Eng Huat, won with 62.1 per cent of the vote - despite the PAP's best efforts to convince Hougang voters that the WP had sold them bad fruit once before, to use National Development Minister Khaw Boon Wan's analogy.

This sort of strong condemnation of Mr Yaw's and the WP's actions from the PAP effectively tied its hands once one of its own strayed, say political watchers.

"The PAP came out very strongly to morally condemn Yaw for running away," says former Nominated MP Calvin Cheng.

"In a similar situation now, it had to act in the opposite way from the WP. It could not do what the WP did, which was to let the scandal be exposed in the media first, keep quiet and

defend for weeks, then afterwards expel him."

WP leaders avoided requests for comment for three weeks before issuing a terse statement on the expulsion.

In contrast, Mr Teo carefully laid out on Wednesday the compressed timeline of events leading up to Mr Palmer's resignation: The former Speaker came to him last Saturday, they met the Prime Minister on Sunday, and the resignation was announced three days later.

The party leadership was so determined for the media not to

get wind of the affair and resignation first that PAP MPs were notified of the resignation only an hour before the media.

"Both Michael Palmer and the party wanted to show that they were different," adds Mr Cheng. "He took it like a man, rather than run away."

Some believe that the PAP's freedom of action was circumscribed by the Yaw affair not because they had to show they were different, but because they had to show they were the same.

"Because the WP had already set this precedent of expelling

Yaw, it set this high standard. So I'm sure if Michael Palmer had not offered to resign, the PAP would have asked him to do it," says former Nominated MP Siew Kum Hong.

But there are others who decry this picture of the ruling party, arguing that it has always walked the talk of a "whiter than white" party of politicians with impeccable moral standing - long before the WP had any seats in Parliament.

Political observer Zulkifli Baharudin points to a speech by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan

Yew in 1977. While he did not expect them to be celibate or not divorce, he would not countenance irresponsible philandering that came to his attention.

"Anybody who has a paternity suit against him, he is out and there will be a by-election," Mr Lee said then.

Says Mr Zulkifli: "We have long decided to expect nothing less but the highest moral authority and integrity from our leaders, including in their private lives."

He adds that Mr Lee Kuan Yew made that clear.

"Even without Yaw Shin Leong, PM Lee would have expected the same from Palmer," Mr Zulkifli says.

For Nominated MP and assistant law professor Eugene Tan, the Yaw Shin Leong affair mere-

ly made necessary what the PAP was always inclined to do.

"It made it imperative for the PAP to act in the way it did. This is not to say it would have acted differently if Yaw didn't happen," he says. "Given its longstanding commitment to high moral standards for MPs, what happened was consistent."

Plus, they note that Mr Yaw was just a new backbencher, while Mr Palmer, in his role as Speaker, was the face of the Singapore Parliament and its representative at international fora.

That Mr Palmer would allow a personal indiscretion to put the prestige of Parliament at risk also raises questions about his judgment, some have said.

Ironically, the PAP's decisive, carefully scripted response to Mr Palmer's revelation of an affair

has prompted questions about whether there were more serious breaches that have yet to come to light.

Blogger Alex Au has urged the People's Association and the Government to make known if the romantic affair gave rise to a conflict of interest, an abuse of power or a breach of confidentiality.

In his statement, Mr Palmer made it a point to state that he had never worked directly with Ms Ong although they knew each other from their work in Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC.

If Mr Palmer had not crossed any professional lines, then his resignation was perhaps unnecessary, Mr Au says.

Nominated MP Eugene Tan also worries that an overly moralistic attitude towards personal

indiscretions on the part of public figures could do more harm than good.

"If there's a perception that going into priesthood, there will be people who might not be comfortable with that," he says. This could make it harder to attract people to politics, he adds.

### Zero tolerance

THE PAP's founding generation was indeed famous for a zero-tolerance policy to personal indiscretion.

Not for them the social mores of Continental Europe where former French president Francois Mitterrand's mistress and illegitimate daughter also had a state-sponsored security detail.

Rather, the political climate

here has always been in an Anglo-Saxon vein where indiscretions cost politicians dearly.

Former deputy prime minister S. Rajaratnam said in 1988 of PAP politicians: "Honesty, morality, being ashamed... are most important of all. After that do brains and ability matter."

But in this age of social media, "leaving quietly" is perhaps no longer an option.

Says one PAP MP who spoke on condition of anonymity: "I don't know why (Michael Palmer) came forward when he did, but it was probably because he knew that in this day and age, there was no way it wouldn't come out."

When he found out that former Cabinet minister Othman Wok had two wives in the late 1970s, he told Mr Othman that if he could not "solve his personal problems", he should not continue in his work, recounted the latter in a 1998 interview.

This, to a man Mr Lee would later credit tearfully for standing

by him during the communal troubles before Independence.

Later on, recalls former PAP MP Wang Kai Yuen, the approach softened slightly to one where MPs were asked quietly to leave the party when their indiscretions came to light.

But in this age of social media, "leaving quietly" is perhaps no longer an option.

Says one PAP MP who spoke on condition of anonymity: "I don't know why (Michael Palmer) came forward when he did, but it was probably because he knew that in this day and age, there was no way it wouldn't come out."

When he found out that former Cabinet minister Othman Wok had two wives in the late 1970s, he told Mr Othman that if he could not "solve his personal problems", he should not continue in his work, recounted the latter in a 1998 interview.

### Changing social mores

COME out it did, complete with screen grabs of intimate text and e-mail exchanges between Mr Palmer and his paramour.

The dalliance, involving a holder of high office who was second in line to succeed the President, has quickly eclipsed other political sex scandals and scandalised the nation.

It was a far cry from the affairs with never even had their identities confirmed in the press.

And before this year, the sexiest that Singapore politics ever got was a decade ago, in a bizarre incident that technically did not even involve sex: Non-Constituency MP and opposition politician Steve Chia was reported to the police in 2003 by his wife for possessing "sexy" pictures of their maid.

In the immediate aftermath of Mr Palmer's resignation, a straw poll The Straits Times conducted of 50 residents in Punggol East, his former ward, signalled that a majority felt a line could be drawn between personal morals and public performance.

Of them, 37 said that the matter had to do with his personal life, and would not affect their view of the party.

Residents expressed views similar to those in Hougang when Mr Yaw was expelled.

Said one 55-year-old housewife, who wanted to be known only as Madam Tan: "It's quite shocking and very sad. His personal life should be separate from his political career; we should not associate the two because it doesn't mean he can't do his job well."

Some political veterans, like Dr Wong Wee Nam, think that Singaporeans' attitudes towards personal indiscretion on the part of public figures is likely to become more forgiving over time.

"At this moment, we are changing. And as the younger generation replaces the older generation, over time, we will think it is no big deal."

But PAP backbenchers suggest that their party's zero-tolerance approach is one ballasted by principle, not beholden to the changing social winds.

"The PAP wants to hold itself to a certain moral standard," says Ang Mo Kio GRC MP Indrajit Singh.

"I may be an old-fashioned chap, but I subscribe to this standard. This is the party I want to be a part of."

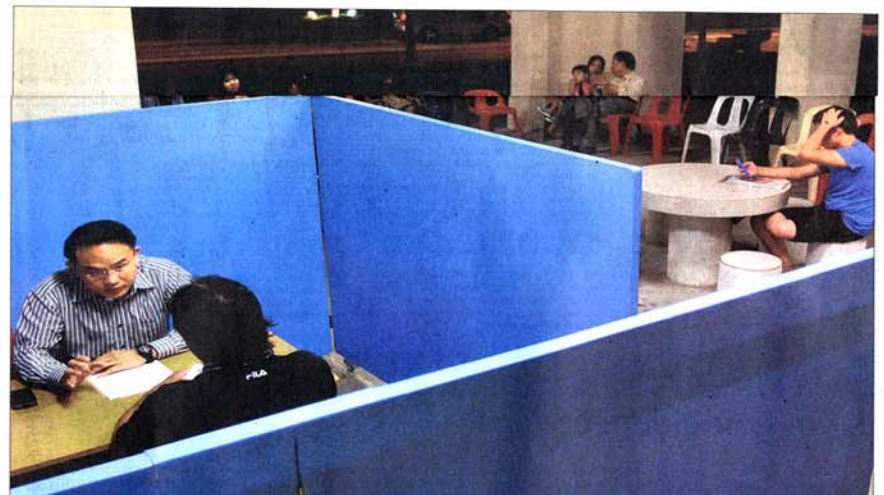
On Wednesday, Mr Palmer's resignation signalled that he, too, believed that the party had to hold itself up to a certain moral standard, even if voters may have forgiven the error of judgment.

In falling short, the cost would be his to bear.

rchang@sph.com.sg  
 twong@sph.com.sg



Mr Michael Palmer (second from right) with members of the public at the launch of the Punggol Promenade and Lorong Halus Wetland in March last year. He resigned as Speaker of Parliament, MP and town council chairman on Wednesday, after admitting to an extramarital affair. ST FILE PHOTO



Mr Yaw Shin Leong (facing camera) during a Meet-the-People Session in February. He was later expelled from the Workers' Party after ignoring repeated requests from the WP leadership to attend meetings to discuss rumours of an extramarital affair. A by-election in Hougang was held in May. ST FILE PHOTO