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Tell us more about NMP hopefuls

A recent exchange in Parliament highlighted the interesting issue of public scrutiny of a group of MPs who are nominated rather than elected and represent the non-partisan views of different sectors and communities.

One among this group, Nominated MP Eugene Tan, asked last Monday if the names of those seeking appointment as NMPs should be made public at some stage of the selection process.

There are currently nine NMPs in Parliament; the Constitution allows for up to nine of them to be appointed for a 2½-year term by the President, on the recommendation of a selection committee chaired by the Speaker of Parliament.

In reply, Leader of the House and Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen said a more open process of selection could deter potential candidates from coming forward, as they might be uncomfortable with the public scrutiny, particularly if they were not in the end appointed as NMPs.

What struck me about Dr Ng's remarks was that, apart from reflecting the People's Action Party Government's position on the NMP system, he could just as easily have been talking about how the all-pervasive scrutiny from a social media-fed public has made it harder for his party to recruit potential candidates for elections.

Embedded in Dr Ng's remarks is a kind of rueful lament at the growing politicisation of society following the 2011 General Election and particularly the Punggol East by-election early this year.

There were many reasons why the incumbent PAP lost in that ward, one of which was a campaign strategy that left its inexperienced candidate flying solo in the initial stages while the opposition Workers' Party had a full team backing their candidate throughout.

The missteps in the PAP campaign – amplified through social media – cost it a seat, as well as a candidate it felt was strong enough for higher office. More on political recruitment in the new normal later.

I actually agree with Associate Professor Tan's view that there is a need to make the NMP system more transparent.

To give another illustration of its opacity, it is not clear to NMP hopefuls what the Special Select Committee of Parliament looks for, as it does not publicise its reasons for selecting a particular slate of can-

didates.

Releasing to the public the names of those up for consideration as NMPs is not an entirely new thing. It would formalise what has been happening on the ground to some extent in the last five years – some sectors do release the names of their NMP candidates to the media, while certain applicants have also declared their interest in the position.

For example, ahead of the last round of NMP selection in January last year, the National Council of Social Service named its multiracial slate of five nominees. One of them, Mr Laurence Lien, chief executive of the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre, was selected as an NMP.

Many other names in the hat were also revealed, including actress Janice Koh representing the arts, then fencing association president Nicholas Fang representing the sporting community, environmentalist Faizah Jamal and Associate Professor Tan, a law academic. All four are now NMPs.

One can argue that unveiling all the NMP hopefuls is sorely needed in this climate of increased political participation.

Ahead of the current 2½-year term for NMPs that started in February last year, a record number of 50 candidates was proposed, the most

since the scheme started in 1990.

While the selection is ultimately in the hands of the parliamentary committee – its members include Dr Ng, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Grace Fu and Workers' Party MP Low Thia Khiang – it would add to the robustness of the process if the public could give feedback on the candidates.

Selecting an NMP is not the same thing as choosing a chief executive or a top civil servant.

Scrutiny part of the job, if fear of public scrutiny deters potential candidates, then in all likelihood, those candidates are not meant to be NMPs in the first place.

It is a political appointment – the NMPs are independent insofar as they are not members of political parties, but they do represent specific constituencies, be it academia, social services, the labour movement, small and medium-sized enterprises, arts, sports or the environment. Each NMP brings his or her own political and moral convictions to bear on law-making and public policy.

There is no better illustration of

the political nature of the job than the lightning-rod 2007 parliamentary debate in which then NMP Siew Kum Hong proposed repealing Section 377A of the Penal Code, the law criminalising homosexuality.

He found his fiercest opponent in a fellow NMP at the time, constitutional law professor Thio Li-ann, a Christian.

The debate led to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong saying that the law would stay but would not be proactively enforced. It still has reverberations today, with gay activists and liberals arguing for the law's repeal and conservatives and religious groups calling for the line to be held.

Other barometers of how NMPs have shaped the nation's political life include legislation such as the Maintenance of Parents Act, pushed through by then NMP Walter Woon in 1994, and the growing premium placed on nature and heritage, advocated over the years by past and present NMPs such as environmentalist and eye surgeon Geh Min and Ms Faizah.

Given the political nature of the job, if fear of public scrutiny deters potential candidates, then in all likelihood, those candidates are not meant to be NMPs in the first place.

More broadly, Dr Ng's reply highlights the predicament of the PAP as it faces a more demanding

electorate that wants to put back the "political" into politics.

Singaporeans want to see a contest of views. They want top brains and likeability, a good track record as well as commitment to the long haul.

On all these counts, recruitment is tough not just for the ruling party but also the opposition.

As Ms Fu mused in a recent, candid interview with this newspaper's Singapolitics website: "The pool of candidates is getting smaller, and that pool will have more concern than before about how this impacts their personal life. Now we have to really look for different qualities. Now we need them to have it all."

It is true that there is the real issue of a leadership vacuum if the PAP cannot find enough good candidates for the next two general elections, given that the WP has said many times that it is not yet ready to form the government.

However, I believe there are still people who care enough about Singapore to come forward whether as PAP, opposition or non-partisan NMP candidates.

In a post-Lee Kuan Yew Singapore, this new generation of leaders needs to negotiate a fresh social contract and connect anew with Singaporeans.

Decades have been spent building up a solid foundation in governance and technocratic leadership.

There is now a corresponding need for a more resilient and robust civil society. Making the NMP scheme more transparent will be a small but valuable step in that process.

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