

Writ of Election announced yesterday

Let the courtship of Punggol East begin

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AS THE parties gear up for a by-election, there is talk that the Opposition parties are in secret talks to prevent a possible five-cornered fight – and a splitting of votes that will help the incumbent People's Action Party.

On Nomination Day next Wednesday, residents in the Single Member Constituency (SMC) will know if that is the case and who they'll get to vote for as their voice in Parliament is likely to be.

If more than one political party presents a candidate that day, the 33,000-plus voters will go to the polls on Jan 26 to choose their intended representative.

This comes after the Writ of Election was announced yesterday.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said he decided "to

hold a by-election in Punggol East to give the residents their own MP in Parliament".

The January timing comes in the midst of a busy national agenda.

Issues like the Population White Paper, Budget 2013 and Our Singapore Conversation have been lined up for debate this year, PM Lee said in a press statement and on Facebook.

Then, there are continuing priorities like economic growth and workers' incomes.

The Punggol East seat was vacated last month after its MP, Speaker of Parliament Michael Palmer, resigned over an extramarital affair.

His departure sparked discussion on who would fill the void.

Four opposition parties – the Workers' Party (WP), the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), Reform Party (RP) and Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA) – have signalled their interest in contesting.

At last night's Meet-the-People Session (MPS), WP chief Low Thia Khiang said it was good that PM Lee had called the by-election as early as possible.

Mr Low said the party would contest the seat, but it would unveil its candidate at a later date. (See report below.)

He added: "We are ready for the by-election. Our logistics are ready."

'PM's exemplary leadership'

Nominated MP Eugene Tan said having the by-election sooner rather than later shows the PM's exemplary leadership.

"He is putting the long-term interests of the country ahead of the party's short-term interests," Associate Professor Tan said.

But SDP chief Chee Soon Juan said in a statement last night that the call for a by-election on a tight deadline



MEET THE PEOPLE: Dr Koh Poh Koon (bending) was introduced by Minister of State for Trade and Industry Teo Ser Luck to Punggol East residents on Tuesday.

TNP PICTURE: BENJAMIN SECTOR

"signals desperation to get matters (like an inability to rein in housing prices and the AIM town council software controversy) out of the way rather than confidence in resolving them".

He added: "The PM has pressed the panic button." A snap by-election means opposition parties have to make a snap decision on whether to contest.

And a multi-cornered fight could split the opposition's votes, ultimately benefiting the ruling party, said Mr Mano Sabnani, a veteran commentator on local politics and the economy.

He cautioned: "This is not a GE buffet for opposition parties to choose which GRC to contest, this is a by-election with one seat and one small pie on the table."

"At most, the pie can be shared with two people, so each gets a larger share. If four people were to share it, eventually no one would be happy with their portion of the pie."

Asked about the likelihood of a multi-cornered fight unfolding, former presidential candidate Tan Jee Say said: "From what I understand, some of the opposition parties are in discussion, with Dr Chee reaching out."

"It's still early...the dynamics and the number of parties going in (to contest Punggol East) won't be known until a later date," he added.

Carved from Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC, Punggol East saw a three-cornered fight among the PAP, WP and SDA during the 2011 General Election.

Prof Tan, a Singapore Management University law lecturer, said the opposition parties' interest was understandable.

"The by-election presents parties with opportunities to profile themselves. It's free advertisement and no one wants to be excluded."

The demographics are a draw as well. "Punggol East is a relatively young constituency and young people tend to be less enamoured of the PAP. They are more open to the opposition's courtship," he said.

Favourable to opposition?

Positive ground sentiments, helped by the liability that Mr Palmer's case posed to the PAP, could also be a factor, said National University of Singapore political science associate professor Hussain Mutalib.

"Opposition members could have realised that... if they wish to have a go as an MP, now is a good time to do so while the ground post-GE 2011 is still favourable to them."

But WP's Mr Low declined to be drawn into speculation about a multi-cornered fight.

"As far as I know, there is no joint opposition meeting being called," he said.

He also declined to speculate on WP's likely showing this time, saying that "we have contested before and got a decent result".

Whoever the candidates are, quality is key. Said Mr Tan Jee Say: "While opposition unity is important, it must not come at the voters' interests. The quality of candidates is of utmost importance."

LIKELY CANDIDATES



People's Action Party Dr Koh Poh Koon

His appearance at Punggol East's Meet-the-People Session on Tuesday fuelled talk that he will be the party's candidate for the ward.

Dr Koh, 40, who is married with three children, lives in a Telok Blangah HDB flat.

He is one of four surgeons trained specifically in colorectal surgery who forged a partnership with Fortis Healthcare to set up the \$70 million hospital at Adam Road.

Although he has his own private practice at Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre, Dr Koh continues to serve in public hospitals. He has been described as a keen grassroots volunteer.

The former head of Singapore General Hospital's colorectal surgery department, Dr Eu Kong Weng, who was Dr Koh's boss for 12 years, described him as "young, ambitious, bright and usually logical".



Workers' Party Lee Li Lian

Ms Lee Li Lian, 34, a deputy webmaster with the Workers' Party, was the party's choice in the 2011 General Election (GE).

In the three-way fight, she got 41 per cent of the vote while Mr Michael Palmer won with 54.5 per cent.

She is a trainer with a private institution and has been actively involved in both industrial and financial sales for more than six years. She is married to a telecommunications consultant.

She graduated from Ngee Ann Polytechnic in 1999 with a Diploma in Business Studies and received a bachelor's degree in sales and marketing from Curtin University of Technology.



Singapore Democratic Alliance Desmond Lim Bak Chuan

THE Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA) secretary-general, 45, got 4.45 per cent of the vote in the seat at GE 2011 and lost his election deposit of \$16,000.

His foray into politics started in 1989 in Rochor Community Centre, where he was one of the grassroots leaders.

Mr Lim first stood for election in 2001, representing the Singapore Justice Party, and later joined the Singapore People's Party.



Singapore Democratic Party Paul Ananth Tambyah

THE party has narrowed down its candidates to three – Dr Paul Ananth Tambyah, party treasurer Dr Vincent Wijesingha and Dr Ang Yong Guan.

Drs Ang and Wijesingha are the remaining active members of its Holland-Bukit Timah GRC team, which garnered 40 per cent of the vote in GE 2011.

It's unclear if the party will risk taking one of them out of that team to contest the single seat.

Instead, it may opt for Dr Tambyah, 47, a member of the SDP Advisory Healthcare Panel.

He is a senior consultant in the National University Hospital specialising in infectious diseases and an associate professor of medicine at National University of Singapore.

Dr Tambyah was part of SDP's first walkabout in Punggol East on Sunday, visiting Rivervale Mall and some 20 housing blocks.

He also spoke at several SDP rallies during GE 2011 and has contributed to some of the party's policy papers.



Reform Party Kenneth Jeyaretnam

The Reform Party (RP) chief, 53, is the son of the late J.B. Jeyaretnam, who formed RP in 2008 and was Singapore's first opposition politician to win a seat in Parliament in 1981.

He has more than 30 years' experience in the finance industry and has a first-class honours BA and an MA in economics from Cambridge University.

He has been seen in the Punggol East area introducing himself to residents.

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