

LunchWithSumiko



Keep calm and stay grounded

Leader of the Opposition Pritam Singh believes that when things are going good, it's best to keep your feet grounded and not get overly exuberant, he tells Executive Editor Sumiko Tan



Workers' Party secretary-general Pritam Singh was formally designated Leader of the Opposition after the general election in July last year. Among other things, he was given an office in Parliament House, which he moved into last November, has the right of first response among MPs, and gets more time to speak. ST PHOTO: LIM YAQYU

Two framed photographs hang on the walls of Leader of the Opposition Pritam Singh's new office in Parliament House. They were given to him by a friend who got them at an auction.

The one on the left near the door shows a very large crowd at a Workers' Party (WP) rally in the 2011 General Election.

The one on the right, above his desk, depicts a paltry turnout at a People's Action Party (PAP) rally that same year.

There's an irony to the photos, he points out. "The one with the smaller crowd is in power, a reality all of us in the WP must reflect upon and never look past."

We're having lunch at his office on the second floor of the House. He moved in last November and comes in two, three times a week.

It is a longish, well-lit, medium-sized space with a sofa and a meeting table for six. His secretary has a room next door.

Taking pride of place on his desk is a small, framed painting of a ballerina done by his wife.

They had gone for an oil painting course. "I painted a black box and I thought it was very meaningful but it looked horrible. This was her first try but it looks so beautiful." It is the image he uses on his various social media profiles.

In 2018, Mr Singh, an MP for Aljunied GRC, took over as WP secretary-general from Mr Low Thia Khiam, who had been at the helm for 17 years.

In the general election last July, the party won 10 out of 93 seats in Parliament – the largest win by an opposition party ever.

After the results, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said Mr Singh would be formally designated Leader of the Opposition (LO) of the new Parliament.

He would be given an office, staff support and resources, as well as a salary, later revealed to be \$385,000 a year, double what a regular MP gets. He has the right of first response among MPs, gets more time to speak and also gets confidential briefings from the Government.

Our lunch is three years in the making. I'd first WhatsApped Mr Singh in 2018 but he declined. Four more tries over the years finally netted a "yes" and we're meeting in early January.

I'd told him that the format is The Sunday Times pays for the meal. He says he would like a six-inch tuna sandwich from Subway. I get this from Funan Mall, order the same for myself, and walk over to Parliament House.

RELAXED AND CANDID

His public persona is serious and cautious and he is measured with his words. Over lunch, a more relaxed, candid and humorous side emerges.

When preparing him for the video segment, my colleagues get him to adjust his position until they are satisfied with the angle.

To signal the start of the shoot, one of them stretches out his hands and makes a loud, clapping motion in front of Mr Singh's face. Ticked, he spontaneously imitates the action, cracking everyone up.

Mr Singh, 44, shares that Speaker of Parliament Tan Chuan-Jin had shown him two rooms for his office. One is the one we are in and the other is three times the size.

"That room I found incredibly large. I mean, you could grow plants in there," he says. "This room felt a lot more fit-for-purpose. So I said, 'I think this is a better choice.' And so, yes, I was given a choice."

That, by the way, is an insider joke. "Old WP slogan: You Have A Choice," he reminds me.

The first guest at his office was Mrs Lorene Nalpon, his former teacher from his alma mater St Thomas Secondary School whom he invited along with her husband.

"She truly loved all her students and I was quite blessed to be one of them," he says.

When I do a Google search, I find that he had written about Mrs Nalpon in a Facebook post in 2018. She taught him in Secondary 1 where he was in the Normal stream and she was very kind to his "gone case" class.

You sense there is still a part of him that marvels at how his life has turned out. But instead of making him arrogant, his success has kept him grateful and modest, one feels.

At one point, I remark that with all that has happened, he must be in a happy place now.

Mr Singh, who says he is probably more spiritual than religious, replies that life is a mix of ups and downs.

"While today it may be an up – or you perceive it to be an up – don't be too excited or too happy because there will be a down. But when that happens, don't be too sad either. Think of the recovery. "I think a lot of life is like that. So when things are going good, keep

your feet grounded, don't get too exuberant, because these things come in cycles."

LATE BLOOMER

He grew up the younger of two children in a close-knit family. His sister, older by two years, teaches in a junior college. His mother is a housewife and his father, Mr Amarjit Singh, is now a consultant at law firm Donaldson & Burkinshaw.

His father had come to Singapore from India in the early 1960s with two brothers. He joined the Singapore Armed Forces and later became a lawyer, then a district judge and a deputy public prosecutor at the Attorney-General's Chambers. He retired in 2012 as deputy senior state counsel.

TAKING A NEW APPROACH

Sometimes the more you learn, the more you also reframe how relevant you can be.



MR PRITAM SINGH, on how his political style, which used to be more confrontational, has changed.

Mr Singh's mother, who was born in India, made it a point to take him and his sister to India to visit relatives and learn Punjabi. "That was her great hope. My sister is much better at languages. I don't think my mother's wish was actually sufficiently fulfilled with me."

Up till he was 10, the family lived in Block 44 Sims Drive. They later moved to Jalan Kayu, then Normanton Park, and later Jurong.

After Jurong Junior College, he entered the National University of Singapore. A late bloomer, he graduated as the top history and political science student.

He was on a Singapore Armed Forces scholarship and served as a career commissioned officer till he was 26. He went on to get a master's in war studies from King's College London and when he returned, was a research associate at a think-tank and founded a commentary syndicate focused on Asian issues.

In 2009, he enrolled in the Singapore Management University's two-year Juris Doctor programme. He refers to himself as "legally trained" rather than a

lawyer because with his MP work since 2011, he hasn't been able to develop his law career. When he became party secretary-general, he basically turned full-time MP.

His CV lists him as a locum solicitor at Donaldson & Burkinshaw and he shares that he's not sure if he will renew his practising certificate.

He got married in 2012 and his wife, Ms Loveleen Kaur Walia, 37, is a former theatre practitioner who now teaches speech and drama. Their daughters are aged five and two and they live in a condo in Eunos.

LUCK HELPS

He joined the WP in 2010 because he was inspired by Mr Low and party chairman Sylvia Lim. He didn't expect to be elected into Parliament the following year.

In fact, in 2009, he started a blog called Singapore 2025 to house the current affairs articles he had written. 2025 was the target date he hoped to be involved in active politics. "It happened much quicker," he notes.

His entry into opposition politics was low-key though. At GE2011, the focus was on another new face, Aljunied GRC colleague Chen Show Mao, a high-flying corporate lawyer with degrees from Harvard, Oxford and Stanford.

Was there any competition between you and Mr Chen, I ask. "No, no, not at all," says Mr Singh. "He was in a different league altogether."

But Mr Chen didn't stand out in Parliament, either in his first term or his second. He didn't contest last year but remains in the party.

Mr Singh will not be drawn into discussing Mr Chen's performance. It is party policy that "in public we never run down or criticise our running mates no matter what other people may feel about it".

But he says he will always remember Mr Chen for "the

incredible shot in the arm that he gave the WP by virtue of his participation in 2011".

In his earlier MP days, Mr Singh had a more strident style. He has toned this down considerably, to the point, some say, he is too careful and overly politically correct.

On why he has become less confrontational, he says:

"Sometimes the more you learn, the more you also reframe how relevant you can be. If you know one track is not working or has reached the limits of its usefulness or utility, then you choose another approach."

He won't talk about the process by which he became party secretary-general in 2018, when Mr Low put in place his plan to not contest the post.

But in the book *Journey In Blue*, party member and former Non-Constituency MP Yee Jenn Jong writes that the biggest criterion for the position was "how the person could stand up to attacks by the PAP". He also had to inspire confidence in members and preferably be an elected MP. Mr Singh was "the best fit".

Card-carrying members number in the hundreds and they are the party's core, Mr Singh says. "It is the volunteers and the movement that we call it which gives us a certain heft."

I wonder what it was that got him to be where he is. He says he believes in hard work but luck can sometimes play a part too, and shares an anecdote.

When he was in Basic Military Training, he was very skinny and could run quite fast. One of his good friends was very fit and Best Recruit, and they were quite competitive when they ran.

During a race, Mr Singh was lagging behind. "At the last 50m or 100m, my platoon commander, this Malay gentleman, 2WO Abdul Razak, glares at me purposefully and shouts, 'Singh! Come on! You

MAKING HARD CALCULATIONS

Ultimately, the party has to make a cold, hard calculation as to what is required to ensure that the opposition grows from strength to strength, bearing in mind what is the threshold that Singaporeans can accept of an opposition in Singapore.



MR SINGH, on those who feel the WP is not combative enough.

better overtake him!"

"I don't know what it was but the fact that he was there giving me that motivation gave me extra energy. He was a good leader, at the right place, at the right time." He beat his friend by mere metres.

The lesson he took away was that a person's success isn't a solo effort but because "many stars and moons came into alignment for that to happen".

So who gave you that push to ace the race in politics?

He says Mr Low's leadership by example rubbed off on him in a significant way, and he is grateful Mr Low remains in WP's central executive committee.

Does he feel bad that he, rather than Mr Low, got the LO title?

"Most definitely because many of us basically grew out of the crucible of his vision. It would have been more fitting for him to have been LO before me."

Does he signal a new era for the WP, the way Mr Low did when he took over from Mr J. B. Jeyaretnam? No, Mr Singh says. A lot of what the WP is today started from Mr Low and "this is the right track" for an opposition party that seeks to institutionalise the idea of a responsible opposition in Singapore politics.

The WP cannot be a party that doesn't take into account the sentiment of Singaporeans, he argues.

"On certain issues, certainly, Singaporeans call for a more robust form of opposition, and on other issues, I think, they would be more satisfied if you took a more check-and-balance approach. Mr Low distinguished between a mad dog and a watchdog... it goes to the nub of what I think society would regard as sensible."

The PAP's comeback has been that the WP doesn't come up with real policy alternatives and its manifesto is PAP-lite.

What does he say to those who feel the WP doesn't take on the ruling party robustly enough?

People are entitled to say that the party should be more combative, he says. "But ultimately, the party has to make a cold, hard calculation as to what is required to ensure that the opposition grows from strength to strength, bearing in mind what is the threshold that Singaporeans can accept of an opposition in Singapore."

He admits that, internally, it is difficult to make everyone sing from the same song sheet as motivations for joining the opposition vary. Some are more angry, some have a longer vision and an open mind, and others are more hasty for change. The party, though, is known for its discipline.

On its ambitions, he reiterates that the aim for now is for Parliament to have one-third opposition MPs. This will be a "sweet spot" where you have a responsive government and an opposition providing real checks and balances, he believes.

We've been talking for nearly two hours and move on to do the video. When he's done with the last question, he does that clapper motion in front of the camera, wrapping up the shoot and sending everyone laughing again.

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WHAT WE ATE
One 12-inch Subway tuna sandwich: \$9.40

SCAN TO WATCH
Lunch With Sumiko: Pritam Singh
<https://str.sg/lws17>

SCAN TO LISTEN
Listen to Sumiko's lunch with WP chief Pritam Singh
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