

Statement by Mr Chan Chun Sing, Minister of Education, on the abolition of Group Representation Constituencies

Wednesday, 5 July 2023

1. Mr Deputy Speaker.
2. I listened carefully to all the speeches made.
 - a. Particularly, the ones made by Mr Leong and Ms Hazel Poa to move this motion. But perhaps I should just clarify that this motion calls for the abolition of the GRCs, and not about the elected presidency. I appreciate Ms Hazel Poa's various ideas and suggestions, but I was a bit confused by Mr Leong's speech that spent the bulk of his comments on the elected presidency. So, if I stick to the motion, I should confine my comments to the debate on the GRCs today.
 - b. I also like to thank Mr Murali for sharing your very personal experiences and reflections.
 - c. I would like to thank Mr Raj Thomas, Mr Mark Chay and Ms Janet Ang for your very incisive, heartfelt and non-partisan views.
3. Mr Deputy Speaker Sir, the motion put forth today, calling for GRCs to be abolished, comes down to the fundamental philosophy and principles that underpin why this House had agreed to have the GRC system in the first place. The question is:
 - a. Do we, as a people and as a system, believe in ensuring that the Parliament, the highest legislative body of the land, is representative of a multiracial Singapore?
 - b. Or are we willing, as Mr Raj Thomas said, to take the risk of rule by majority without safeguards for our minority communities? Without safeguards against racial politics that can easily tear apart the fabric of our nation.

These are the fundamental issues in discussing this motion and it forms the basis of why we have the GRCs. So, I ask all Members of this House to carefully consider this when we vote on the motion later.
4. Members had also given their views on the design of the GRC system, such as the sizes and number of GRCs that we should have. I will address these issues in my speech. But let me first address the motion put before us, because this is not a motion for reforming GRCs. This is a motion that calls for the GRC system to be abolished altogether. It is the principle of the GRC system that is at stake here today.
5. And finally, I shall conclude by making some observations on how we learn from the experiences of other countries when we design, operate and evolve our own systems. But how we should not copy blindly. We will always seek to develop models, and we must always seek to develop models that best meet our needs and circumstances.

6. Mr Deputy Speaker Sir. Let me start with the two fundamental considerations for our predecessors when they introduced the GRC system – first, to ensure that this House reflects the multiracial make-up of our people, and second, that our politics do not become racially charged. Both are important.

7. When independence was thrust upon us, we could easily have chosen to organise ourselves based on majoritarian rules. But we didn't.

8. Instead, since Independence, we have always been sensitive to the needs of our minorities, especially for the majority to exercise greater responsibility to ensure that the rights and interests of our minorities are not neglected.

- a. In our Constitution, we recognise and safeguard the special position of the Malays as the indigenous people of Singapore. We also clearly state “it shall be the responsibility of the Government constantly to care for the interests of the racial and religious minorities in Singapore”.
- b. We prohibited discrimination against citizens on the ground of race.
- c. We instituted the Presidential Council for Minority Rights, or PCMR in short, to ensure that new laws passed by Parliament do not prejudice any racial or religious community.
- d. We put in place guardrails because we value multiracialism.

9. The GRC system is an extension of this philosophy, to minimise the risk that this House no longer represents our multiracial demography and ride roughshod over the interests of our minority communities. Our GRC system guarantees that Parliament will always be multiracial and representative of the make-up of our society.

10. Next, because the GRC system requires constituencies to be contested by multiracial teams of candidates, political parties and their candidates have to take a moderate, multiracial approach when campaigning instead of a communal or racially extreme approach. This means we minimise the risk that any party can try to win votes by playing the race card. Ms Poa's alternative suggestions of minority NCMPs and proportional representation do not address this point and I will come back to explain this in a while.

11. And this issue matters especially in hotly contested seats where an appeal to race could shape the outcome of a contest. This is very real, as the honourable Member for Bukit Batok had just shared.

12. This matters and will continue to matter, even if a GRC loses its minority member, through illness or resignation, during the Parliamentary term. Because any party that wants to be re-elected will know the importance of winning the support of all races. This is an important safeguard to prevent our politics from becoming racial.

13. So contrary to what was claimed by Ms Poa, the GRC system does not divide us by race. In fact, it is designed to disincentivise the appeal of race in politics. To minimise the chances and leverage that people can use race in an electoral contest. Those are the core and fundamental issues.

14. Let me now deal with the second-order executional issues.
15. First, the claim that GRCs unfairly benefit the incumbent by tapping on the “star-power” in each team. Otherwise, in Ms. Poa’s words, known as the “coat-tail” argument.
 - a. I do not think that “star-power” is the preserve of the incumbent and various speakers have shared that.
 - b. One can also argue that the “star-power” of Mr Low Thia Khiang would have contributed much to the Workers’ Party’s electoral success in Aljunied in 2011.
 - c. Likewise, maybe you would also agree with me, that few would deny that the “star-power” of Mr Tan Cheng Bock had contributed much to PSP’s showing in West Coast in 2020, leading to both Mr Leong Mun Wai and Ms Hazel Poa being the two NCMPs in our House today.
 - d. Conversely, the “star-power” can cut the other way. Should a member of the team, minister or otherwise, become a liability, he or she can also affect the electoral performance of the entire team to the team’s detriment.
16. Second, the size of the GRC. Various members have suggested for the GRC size to be smaller or having more SMCs.
 - a. As members have pointed out, average size of the GRC has come down and the number of SMCs has gone up in the last two elections. There was no 6-Member GRC at GE2020. I want everyone to know that the government understands the sentiments of our people and I am sure the EBRC hears and appreciates the aspirations of our people. Ultimately, the EBRC will take into consideration various factors including what was mentioned today to decide on the boundaries. It is not for the government of the day to decide as suggested by Mr Leong. The government of the day has made clear our position. PM Lee has made clear our position and it is a collective decision of the government of the day.
 - b. I want to touch on this other point which is related to the size and shape of the electoral division. Mr Leong suggested that every one of our divisions is rather homogenous in its characteristics. Indeed so. The question is are we better served if our divisions are not a microcosm of the country. But instead across our island, we have divisions that have very unique and skewed characteristics, and maybe even along racial lines. If so, what kind of outcome do we expect from such electoral contest? The advantage of all divisions being microcosms, of the national characteristics, allows everyone to focus our selection of the candidates to represent them based on our collective national interest and not on sectoral characteristics or interests. Consider this carefully. In other countries, they have gone exactly that way, where electoral contests are fought on narrow sectoral interests or characteristics.
 - c. While we can debate and evolve these features, it does not detract from the underlying fundamental reasons of having the GRC system to ensure that our Parliament remains multiracial and our politics non-racial.

17. Third, on the need to call a by-election to fill a position vacated by a minority or any other member.

- a. This has been debated and clarified in this House and I will not repeat all the arguments.
- b. The courts have settled the law on this. Members may wish to refer to the 2017 High Court decision to dismiss the application filed by Dr Wong Souk Yee for a by-election to be held in Marsiling-Yew Tee GRC after Madam Halimah Yacob resigned her seat as MP to stand for the Presidential election. Dr Wong subsequently filed an appeal over the ruling. However, the Court of Appeal ruled that there was no requirement for a by-election to be called in Marsiling-Yew Tee GRC after Madam Halimah Yacob resigned her seat as MP to stand for the Presidential election.
- c. In a GRC contest, the voters vote for the team, and it is the GRC team that represents the GRC and all its constituents in Parliament.
- d. Not requiring a by-election to fill the position vacated by a minority or any other member is to prevent any single member holding the rest to ransom by threatening to step down.
- e. This also does not detract from the fact that no one can hope to gain electoral advantage by playing on race, as the team would still be required to be multiracial in their approach and advocacy of Singapore's interests to appeal to all races in the next election.

18. Fourth, the claim that the GRC system has stunted the growth of the Opposition.

- a. As Mr Leong pointed out, before the introduction of the GRC system, we had only two Opposition Members of Parliament in 1984.
- b. After the 2020 GE, we now have ten Opposition members elected to this House as well as two non-constituency members.
- c. I think it would be fair to say that the number of Opposition members in this House ultimately depends more on the quality of the candidates, and whether they are able to secure the support of Singaporeans to be elected into Parliament, than just whether they are competing in a SMC or GRC.
- d. If the PSP truly believes that the GRC system disadvantages you, then I find it odd that you sent 19 of your 24 candidates to contest in four GRCs in the most recent general election, instead of contesting in all the SMCs possible.
- e. Unless the constraint was due to the inability to attract sufficient quality minority candidates. If so, then this is precisely what the GRC system seeks to do – to prevent single-race party campaigning along racial lines.

19. Fifth, why not have other forms of proportional representation system to ensure minority representation in this House as suggested by Ms Poa?

- a. This issue has also been debated extensively in this House, and I will again not repeat all the arguments. Members may wish to refer to the Hansard, in particular the speech by the Prime Minister, on 27 January 2016, during the Debate on the President's Address.

In essence, a Proportional Representation system will result in parties based on race and religion, or a special interest. Some parties will be incentivised to build their base around a particular interest in order to win seats, rather than to appeal to a broad majority of voters.

- b. Ms Poa also suggested having a NCMP scheme for minorities, so that minority candidates who lost the contest in SMCs but have the highest percentage of votes can be appointed as NCMPs. I thought deeply about this suggestion. But unfortunately, I don't think it will achieve our objectives of ensuring parliament is multiracial and minimising the chances of candidates and parties playing the race card. Let me explain.
- c. First, if we only have SMCs, there is no guarantee that there will even be enough minority candidates among the losing candidates.
- d. Second, more importantly, the NCMP system comes into play when the ruling party has a large majority in Parliament. By Ms Hazel's suggestion, it will come into play when the ruling party has a large majority without minority MPs or with very few minority MPs. If that is the case, Ms Poa's proposed system will then bring in the unsuccessful minority candidates who performed the best. And what will be the result? We would then likely to have, as Mr Raj Thomas has pointed out, a predominantly Chinese party in power with minority NCMPs in opposition. Parliament would then be divided along racial lines. Our political divide will be along racial lines. This, if I may suggest, will be most dangerous for Singapore.
- e. Various opposition MPs have also previously criticised the NCMP scheme being a second-class MP scheme. If this is true, can we imagine the situation where the minorities are all or largely in the NCMPs or party list as a group, while the rest or vast majority of the elected MPs being the racial majority? Is this a better outcome for us in this House? Is this a better outcome for Singapore? So I have thought deeply about your suggestion but unfortunately, I don't think it will solve our problems. It will complicate things even more.
- f. At the beginning of my speech, I highlighted the twin objectives of the GRC system, and they bear reminding – one, to ensure that our Parliament will always be representative of the racial make-up of our society, and two, to ensure that our politics do not become racially charged. These two objectives are equally important and Ms Poa's suggestion will unfortunately not ensure that our politics do not become racially charged.

20. Now let me move on to another set of important issues.

21. PSP makes the argument that we should move beyond race. And Workers' Party says that we are confident that Singaporeans do not vote solely on race. We agree. I am sure Singaporeans do not vote solely on the basis of race. But that is not the question before us. The question before us is, should race be a factor, a critical factor in their decision, even if it is not the only factor?

22. To PSP and some other opposition members' suggestions that we should move beyond race, we all agree with this aspiration. I am sure I have the support of every member of this House to support this. Indeed, I will be the first to aspire to the day when we have a Singaporean Tribe, regardless of race, language or religion. That we have all gone beyond race.

23. We recite it in our pledge everyday – “We, the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as one united people, regardless of race, language or religion...”

24. But having an aspiration is not the same as it being a reality today.

a. Members may wish to revisit the exchange recorded in the Hansard between the late-Mr Lee Kuan Yew and then-NMP Mr Viswa Sadasivan on this issue on 19 August 2009 as referenced by Mr Raj Thomas in his speech. This is the speech where many of us learnt the phrase “high falutin”.

b. More recently in 2021, a survey conducted by CNA and Institute of Policy Studies found that there is still an in-group preference with respondents preferring those who are racially similar to themselves for many roles.

25. I will personally be very careful and not ignore the realities that we are still confronting today. Many members have shared your own personal stories.

a. Are Singaporeans racists? No.

i. Even if there are a few bad hats, they do not represent us as a people.

b. Are Singaporeans beyond race?

i. I think we have gotten nearer today than yesterday.

ii. I am confident that we will be even nearer tomorrow.

iii. But are we there yet?

iv. So let us, and we will, endeavour and commit to making progress continuously.

c. Are all race issues beyond us?

i. I think we all know the answer in our hearts.

ii. I do not take this issue lightly because I have to deal with them personally. Sometimes in life and death situations. Members of this House who are running their constituencies will know how sometimes neighbour issues can spiral out of control because of a racial element. We don't like to hear this. We don't like to talk about this, and we wish that it doesn't exist. But we know we have to deal with some issues, and we hope that we have to deal with them less and less in time to come. But let me share my own personal experiences:

1. I have commanded units before at various levels and of various sizes. In one of my command, on the first day of my assumption of command, a minority group of soldiers wanted to go AWOL. At least five of them. If the five of them had gone AWOL, it would be a critical incident. It would have to be escalated all the way up to MINDEF HQ. First day of my command. I haven't even had the chance to do anything. I was fortunate. I had a RSM from the same racial group. He told me, "Sir, no worries. Let me deal with this. I will bring them back." Something that he could do that I couldn't have done and certainly not on the first day of my command. Another incident during my command, at the passing of my late father-in-law, I was recalled from overseas one day earlier after the training. While my family was grieving the loss of my late father-in-law, I received a report that a racial riot would soon break out in my unit. Because there were allegations that there had been racial discrimination, injustice, unfairness in the unit. Just allegations. And I had been with my men through and through. We promised each other that this will be a unit that will take care of one another through hell and high water. But it can be stirred up.
2. In 2013, after the Little India Riot broke out. Many of us in the leadership had sleepless nights. We wondered whether we would have a repeat of what happened in 1960s where the suggestions and allegations of racial problems would spark out of control. Not just only in Little India but to every other corner possible in Singapore. It was a moment that I asked myself if this goes out of control, would we lose it all again. These are life and death situations.

26. Hence, I urge Members to have a care when discussing racial issues.

- a. They are not abstract philosophical issues.
- b. They are real issues with real consequences. Sometimes life and death.
- c. These are issues where other mature democracies have to grapple with, and many involving life and death situations.
- d. The visceral emotions, once stirred, have long-lasting consequences.
- e. The wounds and scars can be deep. Even with time, the wounds may never really heal completely, and the scars will remain. Today, we have made progress. Every exception that is raised in this House is a point for us to cheer but as mentioned, exceptions don't make the rule. The rule is not whether SM Tharman can get elected or not. The rule is all else being equal, when someone of SM Tharman's calibre goes to the polls, does it matter even at the margins that his race predominates, or is considered as one of the factors although it is not the sole factor.

27. The GRC system is thus a safeguard to ensure that every GRC would have at least one minority candidate competing as a team, and as a result Parliament is multiracial and we do our best to take race and religion out of the contest.

- a. It does not prevent parties from fielding more than one ethnic minority candidate in a GRC. PAP and WP have done so, and I welcome the PSP to do so too.

- b. What the GRC system seeks to prevent is for parties to campaign singularly for one race, and for Parliament to be represented by one race. That is not the Singapore that we want and aspire to be.

28. Mr Deputy Speaker.

29. Before I restate our position on the GRC motion, I want to make one final point to conclude.

30. The point is this – we are a young nation, with our unique history, circumstances and needs.

- a. We must find and evolve our own way of governance to meet our needs.
- b. We must be bold to evolve our own systems and processes where needed.
 - i. From PCMR to GRC.
 - ii. From CPF to HDB.
 - iii. From EDB to NS.
- c. We must not degenerate into a state where we just blindly copy other people's systems, especially, when those systems are struggling to find the right answers to their own issues. And we must not get into a state whereby we come to this House and tell people to experiment on this system or that system when it has been proven that those systems can't even deliver a better outcome than ours. I would put it to this House - many of us on the front bench don't believe we got here by being an exceptional nation just by copying others. And we certainly don't believe that we will continue to be exceptional and be able to distinguish ourselves just by copying others. Yes, certainly we will continue to learn from other people but we must be fair when we look at other people's systems and bring them to this House. Let's also tell fellow Singaporeans the pluses, the minuses of their systems, of how their systems have performed in their respective countries. And most importantly, even if it has performed relatively well in their country, would it apply to our context? That is our job as Members of this House. If governance is just about copying best practices elsewhere, then we won't be spending so much time trying to find our own unique solutions and models that best serve Singapore and Singaporeans. Not just in this generation but also for generations to come.
- d. Just last week, the US Supreme Court struck down race-based affirmative action programmes in universities. The reactions in America have been sharply polarised.
 - i. To some, this was the right thing to do so – you can only end racial discrimination by being colourblind.
 - ii. To others, this was completely unrealistic, and did not take into account the discrimination that Black and other minority groups continue to face.

- e. We do not judge other systems. They will have to find their own answers to their own issues. Nor do we profess that we have found the perfect system for ourselves. And we certainly will not promote our systems to others without context and understanding and appreciation of their circumstances. So Mr Raj Thomas is right. There is no perfect system, but which is the least imperfect system that serves us best? That serves Singapore and Singaporeans best in the next few generations and going forward?
 - i. But we do not need to be shy to say that our system has largely delivered satisfactory outcomes for our people and country – peace, stability, good governance, multiracial politics and an ethos of stewardship and care for future generations.
 - ii. We have also largely achieved a cohesive society and a non-racially divided parliament. These did not just happen fortuitously. They came about because we carefully designed our systems to manage the possible race issues that could have been politicised and divided us.
 - iii. By any measure, I suggest we have not done too badly compared to others.
 - iv. We will continue to learn from others, but we must never be afraid to chart our own destiny in our own ways.
- f. And we will continue to evolve our system according to our needs. And I really appreciate Mr Raj Thomas' comment about business in this House and Ms Janet Ang's comment. I take it to heart. This House is about governance, of how we run our country. This House is not about experimentation. It is not about just copying other people. We get it wrong; we lose everything that we have built up over all these years. Singaporeans will lose everything we have built up. This is not a gamble. It is not an experiment. It is serious business.

31. Finally, let me reiterate why we will not and should not support this motion.

- a. To support this motion is to go against our founding philosophy of ensuring that the interests of our minority communities are accounted for.
- b. To support this motion is to risk having no or inadequate multiracial representation in the highest legislative body of the land.
- c. To support this motion is to leave to chance the emergence of racial politics and forgo our continued progress towards a system where race is not to be a determining factor in electoral contest.

32. Mr Deputy Speaker Sir, the PAP will vote against this motion to abolish the GRC because it fundamentally goes against what we have been trying to do in building our country as a nation that we can all be proud of, for all these years since our independence. Thank you.