

**Statement by Mr Chan Chun Sing, Minister for Education, for the Prime Minister, on the review of the process by which electoral boundaries are determined**

**Wednesday, 7 August 2024**

1. Mr Speaker, Sir, on behalf of the Prime Minister.
2. Mr Speaker, Sir, first let me say that I would like to thank all the Members who have spoken and given your various suggestions and comments, and I listened to them very carefully. For Ms Hazel Poa who has submitted your speech prior to ELD, we have also examined your suggestions very carefully. Mr Speaker Sir, the Government will continually seek to improve our electoral system to better serve Singapore and Singaporeans. The recent move to improve voter access for overseas Singaporeans is one such example.
3. However, we cannot agree with the premise of this motion.
  - a. First, the motion suggests that the current electoral boundary review process is not transparent and not fair.
  - b. Second, the motion seeks to review the electoral boundary review process in the interests of political parties. This is a fundamentally wrong premise. Electoral boundaries are drawn so that the electorate is best served by their Members of Parliament. The process is meant to serve the interests of Singaporeans, and not the interests of political parties.
4. Sir, the process for delineating electoral boundaries is well known and has been discussed in this House previously on various occasions.
5. Let me reiterate the key points.
6. The review is conducted by the EBRC tapping on the specific expertise of its members, who include qualified senior civil servants with domain knowledge in the technical areas required for boundary delineation. The EBRC works independently and objectively.
7. Since 1958, the Prime Minister's terms of reference to the EBRC and its predecessors have been published. The recommended delineation is presented to Parliament as a White Paper, and this has been so since 1967. All this is on public record.
8. The delineation of the boundaries of electoral divisions comes down to a balance between the population, and the geographical size of each electoral division. Over time, with the movement of people, and the development of new estates and towns, population densities in different areas will change.

9. The EBRC reviews the boundaries holistically, by taking into account such population shifts and housing developments, while making sure that the boundaries make practical sense. A constituency must be an area that its MP or MPs can effectively represent and serve. At the same time, we strive to have some continuity, and minimise the changes that could disrupt existing communities. The EBRC's work is data driven; it is centred on the interests of voters, and not the interests of political parties or candidates.

10. The Government also gives reasonable notice of boundary changes.

- a. The past few General Elections were called some one to three months after the release of EBRC's report.
- b. And as we have said before, we will seek to have sufficient time between the release of EBRC's report and the dissolution of Parliament, so that all political parties and candidates can make the necessary preparations.
- c. To answer Ms Poa's question, the Prime Minister has not convened the EBRC.
- d. The Elections Department has been responding to parliamentary and media queries on whether the Prime Minister has convened the EBRC for the coming General Election. It will continue with this practice and will inform the public when the EBRC is convened.

11. I will now address some other points raised by Ms Poa, A/Prof Jamus Lim and Mr Pritam Singh.

12. Ms Poa and A/Prof Jamus have spoken about "suspicions of gerrymandering" and "reducing the potential for gerrymandering", and used the word "gerrymandering" quite a few times. Let me address this directly.

13. First, let me touch on the EBRC's process and composition, which has allowed the committee to do its job independently and objectively.

- a. The EBRC does not have access to voting information and hence does not make its recommendations based on voting patterns.
- b. The EBRC does not consult the PAP or any other political party. Party politics do not come into this exercise.
- c. The EBRC comprises senior civil servants with no party allegiances.
- d. Therefore, unlike other countries where political parties are involved in the boundary drawing process, EBRC's composition and processes are insulated from party politics. Hence, we do not have the horse-trading and gerrymandering that have taken place in other countries. And I must say, if we get all political parties involved, present or future, it will politicise the whole process and not bring us forward, but backward.

- e. Ms Hazel suggested that the EBRC be chaired by a High Court Judge, and so did Mr Pritam and A/Prof Jamus, to enhance the independence of the EBRC. We have thought about this carefully and we have looked at the experiences of other countries, and we don't think that this will resolve the concern about political interference. Other jurisdictions that have done so continue to face allegations and doubts concerning the independence of their electoral boundary delineation process. Their debate instead sinks into questions on who appoints the Judge and whether the Judge has any political leanings or bias. The judiciary ends up getting drawn into the political debate and the judiciary is politicised. Besides, there are no legal issues in the EBRC's work which require a judicial officer to weigh in. What is required is political neutrality, integrity and objectivity, which I trust all my public service officers have, whether they are in the EBRC or not; for them to discharge their duties without fear and favour.

14. Second, let's look at Singapore's context. The term gerrymander is almost as old as electoral politics. It originated in the United States more than 200 years ago in 1812. Such allegations still persist, including in mature democracies, but the circumstances in Singapore are very different and should cause us to pause and ask ourselves if indeed, such "suspicions" and "potential" of gerrymandering as said, really exist and are possible. Let me explain.

- a. In other countries, gerrymandering happens when political parties manipulate boundaries to favour their supporters in specific areas. This could be voters in urban or rural areas, or in specific ethnic enclaves. The political parties assume that these voters, whom they consider their base, largely remain in the same areas, and therefore can have greater influence in the election outcomes.
- b. But in Singapore, every electoral division is more or less a microcosm of our nation. This is a result of our urban planning where we do not want to have racial or religious enclaves in Singapore, nor do we have a rural-urban divide. Our voter base is also fluid. The voters in a given area are not always the same in every election, because they move around the whole island. For those members who have studied our electoral data, you will know. Some 200,000 electors change their residential addresses annually. Then there are many new first-time voters every electoral cycle. Taken together, these two factors alone will add up to a not insignificant churn of the respective constituencies' electoral roll which calls into question any suggestion of the efficacy of attempts at gerrymandering. Maybe I should put this in context – 200,000 every year, and our electoral roll is about 2.7 million.
- c. I should also point out that changes to the electoral boundaries have a greater impact on the incumbent parties and their MPs, given the substantial investment of time and effort by the MPs and their volunteers to engage and serve the residents, only to see them subsequently re-assigned to another electoral division due to electoral boundary changes. Members may want to speak to Mr Sitoh Yih Pin on this after the debate.

15. Taking a step back, what we have heard from Ms Poa and others, and what they are really saying when she raises the point about gerrymandering comes down to this: we almost won this constituency, we think we can take it the next time, so don't touch it, because we want to try again. Paradoxically, if indeed the EBRC really takes these political considerations into account, then this would certainly qualify as gerrymandering!

16. Let me now address Ms Poa's and the other speakers' points about explaining boundary changes. Sir, at the end of the day, any boundary change is the result of the EBRC applying the principles and considerations that I have set out. Those principles and considerations are not different from what has been articulated in this House in the past. We know, and all of us also want more explanation from the EBRC, but we also have to strike a practical balance so that our public officers are given the space to do their work independently and objectively, without fear or favour; that they should be allowed to provide recommendations without the fear that every change to the electoral boundaries will be politicised if viewed unfavourably by certain political parties or individuals, no matter how minor those recommendations may be.

17. Sir, there is no secret formula. And frankly I don't think any amount of explanation is going to satisfy any political party, be it incumbent or opposition – that they may be unhappy with boundary changes. They are unhappy not because of the process but because of the outcome – they think they have lost out, that the map disadvantages them politically. And there is nothing that the EBRC can say about its process that will satisfy any political party, because, as I have said, the EBRC does not take political interests into account.

18. Indeed, when the EBRC reviews the boundaries, it does so holistically – not only to take into account population shifts as mentioned, but also to balance the need for some continuity in community formation, as well as the objective of allowing the elected Member of Parliament to serve the constituency effectively. This is an established process, which has worked and served us well. Setting some fixed formula for the review or involving other persons who do not have the relevant expertise and knowledge to do the work, as suggested by Ms Hazel, may instead undermine the effectiveness of the EBRC in carrying out its work. And the most important point is that the involvement of political parties will also certainly politicise the process. And I think it will bring us backwards.

19. Ms Poa spoke about the need for the electors' votes to carry the same weight; she also suggested narrowing the range of voters per MP, and she cited the UK and Australia as examples. Mr Speaker, Sir. We are certainly for learning from others. However, we must try to learn the right lessons in context. We must also present the comparison and lessons from other countries holistically and responsibly.

- a. For context, while the UK and Australia examples may suggest a smaller margin of deviation per constituency, what Ms Poa should also highlight is that their number of electors per MP is 2 to 3 times that of ours. Applying the same margin of deviation to a smaller base will certainly lead to more frequent and more drastic change to boundaries because of our high rate of movement and change of address within a small city state. This may be the exact opposite of what Ms Poa may desire.

- b. Since 1980, we have a planning norm of  $\pm 30\%$  variation in the average number of electors per Member of Parliament. In our context, because population shifts between general elections can be quite significant as I have illustrated, lowering the planning norm would likely require more extensive and more disruptive redrawing of boundaries.
- c. A lower variation in the elector to MP ratio between constituencies is also not the only or overriding consideration. We can probably lower the percentage variation if we only have a few super constituencies with much larger populations. But again, I don't think that is what Ms Poa is suggesting, nor do we think it is a good outcome necessarily because, in absolute terms, voters would be served by fewer MPs. An advantage of Singapore being a small country with a small population is that we can have much smaller constituencies both in terms of population and area, which makes for a stronger connection between MPs and the area and voters that they serve. Smaller constituency populations in absolute terms do mean that the percentage variation can be larger, and we have to strive for a balance between the two that suits our context, rather than pursue one at the expense of the other.
- d. On the weight of each vote. We have also studied the systems in other countries very carefully. No electoral system in the world can definitively claim that every vote is exactly the same or near equal. Even in established democracies today, we still have endless debates if the weight of every vote is the same. For example, in elections now ongoing, there are places which ask why are smaller states having the same number of senators or representatives as bigger states. Does that not mean that their votes are not of equal weightage?

20. On Ms Poa's suggestion for major and minor boundaries, we have also studied it and we are not sure it will resolve the fundamental issue when boundaries change. Unlike big countries, with different states and provinces, we are a city state with high mobility of our residents in every electoral cycle. To have "major boundaries" that cannot be changed and are immune to population shifts may not work out in Singapore. Then there would be the question of who and how should we delineate what constitutes major and minor boundaries, and we are back to square one.

21. At the end of the day, what counts is the candidates that the party put forth, and whether they are able to win the hearts and minds of Singaporeans to get elected into Parliament. At General Election 2020, the formation of the new Sengkang Group Representation Constituency (GRC) did not prevent the Workers' Party from winning the GRC, and that is why A/Prof Jamus Lim is here today. It is not for me to tell the parties and candidates how they should win the hearts and minds of our electorate. As Members have said, Singaporeans are wise people. They would know who have put in their hearts day in, day out to serve them and I am sure they will cast their votes accordingly.

22. Sir, no system is static, but our system has worked reasonably well. According to the Spring 2024 Global Attitudes Survey by the Pew Research Center, more than three-quarters of the Singaporeans interviewed were satisfied with the way democracy is working in Singapore, and Singapore ranked first within the Asia-Pacific region in terms of the level of satisfaction with our practice of democracy. As the survey findings show, we have a trusted electoral system that allows the electorate to vote freely for Members of Parliament who will do their best in looking after the constituents' interests, representing them in Parliament and forming a Government to run the country responsively and responsibly.

23. To keep our electoral system working well, it must continue to be based on what is best for Singapore and Singaporeans. Our system will continue to evolve, but we should not be changing the system, whether it is the electoral boundary review process or some other aspect, for the convenience or advantage of individual political parties. And when we study other people's system, we should also look at the system in entirety rather than to pick and choose certain aspects that may or may not be able to be applied in context to ours, while neglecting other aspects in their system as well.

24. All political parties also should not expect to keep or win seats because the boundaries are drawn one way or the other.

- a. Singaporeans are discerning voters, and so I urge all candidates to fight an election on substance. Earn the trust of the electorate with concrete actions. Focus on how to serve the voters and gain their trust, wherever you choose to stand, rather than thinking about excuses for not being able to do so. Our electoral boundary review system is generally functioning well, and seeks to ensure that voters distributed across Singapore are represented in Parliament in as fair a way as possible.
- b. Sir, the test of any electoral system is not its theoretical merits, but whether in practice it has worked for the country. In other words, whether it has enabled the electorate to elect governments whom they trust, and who serve them well. By those two tests, our system is reasonably good. Trust levels in Singapore, including in Government, are high and even the Opposition (and many opposition voters) will concede that the PAP Government has served Singaporeans well and to the best of our ability.
- c. However, intentionally or unintentionally, this motion sows distrust and disaffection. This is disastrous for our political system and for Singaporeans. Low trust countries are stuck in a vicious cycle, where the Government cannot do things that are urgent and necessary because the population does not trust them, and therefore they fail and the population's trust in their leaders and system is further diminished, and we are on a downward spiral.

25. Sir, our electoral boundary review process is fair and transparent. Elections remain clean and fair. The Government will oppose the motion given its false premises and suggestions that the electoral boundary review process, and our public officers who serve on it, have not been transparent or fair. But we assure everyone that we will continue to evolve our electoral processes to better serve Singapore and Singaporeans, first and foremost.