

THE FIRST WAVE



JBJ, CHIAM & THE OPPOSITION IN SINGAPORE

LOKE HOE YEONG

Author of Let the People Have Him: Chiam See Tong, the Early Years

Advance praise for *The First Wave*

“Most commentators have commonly attributed the plight of the Republic’s Opposition parties to the PAP government’s tactical and strategic finesse and its deliverance of a good life in modern and prosperous Singapore. However, the Opposition’s shifting electoral tides and relatively weak performance are also due to other contributory factors. To these, one must include history, political culture, leadership, and extent of internal stability of the Opposition camp vis-à-vis the government...

“Loke Hoe Yeong’s reflections and acute grasp of the above political imperatives—while also not casting aside other unpredictable imponderables in the Republic’s political landscape—place this well-researched and well-articulated study a cut above many other writings about Singapore’s Opposition parties. Not intending to be a comprehensive project about Opposition parties and focusing more on the pivotal role played by J. B. Jeyaretnam and Chiam See Tong, this book contributes to our greater understanding of Singapore’s modern political history as a whole.”

—Professor Hussin Mutalib, PhD, author of *Parties and Politics: A Study of Opposition Parties and the PAP in Singapore*

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EPIGRAM
SINGAPORE · LONDON

Also by Loke Hoe Yeong
Let the People Have Him: Chiam See Tong, the Early Years

To Eunjeong

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“All a poet can do today is warn.
That is why the true Poets must be truthful.”

—Wilfred Owen, *draft Preface*

INTRODUCTION

Democratisation has been described to occur in waves, rather than as sudden bolts, as would be ascribed to political revolutions, for instance. The first wave of a democratic awakening in post-independence Singapore did start though with the bolt of J. B. Jeyaretnam's surprise victory (or, for the People's Action Party [PAP], a shock defeat) in the Anson by-election of 1981. Only one general election before that in 1980, the ruling PAP was still looking at a share of 75.6 per cent of the popular vote with zero representation in Parliament from the opposition. Nevertheless, the momentum of opposition growth in Singapore built up gradually through to the 1984 general election, the first of many elections in Singapore to be called a "watershed," in which Chiam See Tong was also elected in Potong Pasir. After the 1991 general election, and with a record four members in Parliament, the opposition began dreaming of forming the government one day.

But their euphoria was short-lived. After all, the use of the wave analogy also implies an element of ebb and flow. Almost immediately after the opposition victories of 1991, fault lines in the leading Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) rose to the surface, and the party was wiped out of Parliament in 1997. The opposition, as fronted by Chiam, spent the next decade thereafter experimenting with coalition arrangements among themselves.

But it was not until the 2011 general election that the Workers' Party, led by its new leader, Low Thia Khiang, would more substantial gains for the opposition.

What went wrong with the first generation of Singapore's post-independence opposition? This book examines their rise and fall in the period from 1981 to 2011, with the aim of filling a gap in explanations of Singapore politics.

Problematic explanations of Singapore's politics

The old adage that "oppositions don't win elections, governments lose them" suggests incumbency is generally a liability for ruling parties. Although Singapore has always been known to be a *sui generis* case, there is a prevalence of muddled explanations as to why Singapore is that to such a great degree.

One school of thought favours the PAP and credits the longstanding ruling party of Singapore for winning the hearts and minds of the electorate with their policies, which have brought stability and prosperity, and chastises the opposition for failing to get its act together.

Meanwhile, the other school of thought sympathises with the opposition, and blames the PAP for the unfair hurdles and barriers erected against it, such as laws and regulations that restrict funding and the avenues of communication for opposition parties, and for creating a "climate of fear" that discourages more credible opposition candidates from stepping forward. Sometimes, the latter group admits that Singaporeans have been willing to sacrifice some political freedoms in return for political-economic stability.

Writing in 1995, the sociologist Chua Beng Huat asserted that "it should be obvious that the refrain of authoritarianism as the explanation of Singapore's political development in the past three decades is inadequate."¹ His classic text, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*, recognised a "polarisation" that has characterised studies on Asian governments, which either "concentrates on a history of authoritarian repression" or "unequivocally praises the regime."²

That situation remains unchanged in some quarters today. Outside of Singapore, observers and researchers from the media, academia and non-governmental organisations tend to be aligned with the latter group. This resonates with the democracy indices by organisations like Freedom House and the Economist Intelligence Unit, which generally rank Singapore far down the list, setting it apart from its peers in the club of advanced economies.

To be clear, this is not to be an apologist for repressive laws, just as it is inconceivable for Chua to be one. Important as they are, those critiques of the Singapore system belong to a different debate. In fixating themselves on Singapore's restrictions on political freedoms and civil liberties, these observers miss the opportunity to offer rigorous explanations on why things have turned out the way they do.

The question is whether their analyses stand the test. Witness how in the aftermath of the 2011 general election, for instance, some scholars of democratisation expounded on the way opposition parties were finding "new energy and backing, as young people flock to social media to express themselves more openly," and how the PAP appeared to be "entering a more vulnerable phase" which would "accelerate when the founding generation of leaders, particularly Lee Kuan Yew...passes from the scene"—only to be proven completely wrong on all counts at the 2015 general election.³ To be fair, by most accounts, the PAP were surprised at their own strong showing that year.

On the other hand, there have been scholars who have theorised Malaysia as one of the Southeast Asian authoritarian regimes where "democratisation by elections" is highly unlikely to happen because their elections are deemed to be so flawed⁴—only to be found scrambling for explanations and qualifications when the opposition Pakatan Harapan alliance won the 2018 Malaysian general election.⁵

To put things in an international context, these misguided analyses were comparable to the abject failure of many leading experts and observers to foresee the results of the 2016 Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom or the presidential election in the United States that

same year, because of their misreading of the overall ground sentiments.

Also, some of these observers have waded into the debate between the “moderate opposition” and the “confrontational opposition” in Singapore, one key theme in this book. The frequent criticism they make of the opposition in Singapore—particularly of Chiam See Tong and Low Thia Khian—is that they are not radical enough, and are not offering a differentiated choice for voters vis-à-vis the PAP; ergo, they have failed to make greater inroads into Parliament or induce substantive political change.⁶ Their observations may be valid insofar as it is a reflection of how powerfully the PAP government has shaped the national narrative of what kind of politics is desirable for Singapore. But they ignore the fact that there is at least one tradition of opposition politics in the West which says that “an Opposition must oppose but not obstruct, it must be constructive, not disruptive.” Those observers also do not address a strategic dilemma facing the opposition in Singapore, to which the political scientist Hussin Mutalib has alluded⁷—if too confrontational, the opposition would lose a considerable swathe of generally contented, middle-ground voters; if too moderate, the PAP’s technocratic superiority would beat them to it where policy prescriptions are concerned.

However, if there is one aspect that makes it problematic, it is how it may affect a factual understanding and analysis of a fateful key event in Singapore’s political history of the opposition, the SDP’s fratricide and fracture of 1993, which we turn to next.

Political history: the SDP’s fratricide and fracture of 1993

While borrowing the analogy of the “democratic wave theory,” this book, however, departs from its progenitors—such as the political scientist Samuel Huntington—in terms of the lens of analysis used. One could look, as Huntington and others have, at socio-cultural and economic factors, or at cataclysmic events such as the fall of Communism in 1989, for the causes behind democratisation in countries around the world.⁸ Yet efforts towards creating a theory of what is it that

promotes or constrains democracy have been inconclusive at best. Scholars of politics and democracy are beginning to admit the futility of propagating ever more theories of democratisation, and are looking instead from the angle of how states like Singapore contain political conflict and contention.⁹

That is when one should also look to *political history*, a study of politics through a linear, path-dependent approach.¹⁰ While structural, socio-economic factors certainly provide a good framework to account for the opposition’s weakness and the PAP’s strength, especially where they relate to the outcomes of elections, this book seeks to fill a vital missing link in solving the puzzle.

When politicians make decisions on how to act, they are more likely to make a cost-benefit assessment of the political choices before them, rather than to ponder over the type of authoritarian or democratic regime they wish to adopt. This relates to what academics call “path-dependency”—what politicians say or do in the initial stages of events can predetermine their actions later on; one action or decision begets the next. And rather than just telling a nice story, the framework of political history also provides us with the whole kaleidoscope of contextual factors of a given political situation.

The story of the SDP’s split of 1993 is that key to explaining the rise and fall of the first generation of Singapore’s opposition. It continues to be an emotive issue among the different quarters in the opposition to this day. As late as May 2016, the PAP has continued to use the event to discredit Chee Soon Juan in the Bukit Batok by-election, casting aspersions on his character, just as it had done back in the 1990s. Chee and his supporters claim that he has been the victim of “gutter politics.”¹¹ On the other hand, the narrative that Chee had betrayed his mentor Chiam continues to hold traction.¹²

Most viscerally, it was after the split in the SDP that it lost its two remaining seats in Parliament at the ensuing general election in 1997, and more than two decades thereafter at this time of writing, it has still not been successful at re-entering Parliament to date. That is not to discount the

PAP's role in erecting hurdles and barriers for the opposition, which Part II ("Besieged") lays out—from the procedural (town councils, the group representation constituency [GRC] system and the elected presidency) to the demonstrative (the "climate of fear" in the aftermath of the arrests under the Internal Security Act [ISA] of 1987 and 1988). Rather, what happened in 1993 was the crux of at least a decade of movements and developments within the opposition camp.

The whole train of events could be traced from Jeyaretnam's disqualification from Parliament in 1986 and the arrests in 1987 of 22 Singaporeans under the ISA, a number of them affiliated with the Workers' Party. Around this time, there was also the exodus of the clique of Wong Hong Toy, the chairman of the Workers' Party who fell out with Jeyaretnam, and then defected to Chiam's SDP. It was Chiam who survived as the sole opposition MP after the ensuing general election in 1988. (Lee Siew Choh, the erstwhile leader of Barisan Sosialis that had merged with the Workers' Party on the eve of that general election, became a Non-Constituency MP.)

As the augmented SDP prepared for the next general election, the "by-election effect" was conceptualised and that helped the SDP in no small part to clinch three seats at the 1991 general election.

It was the up-and-coming SDP that Chee Soon Juan, a young lecturer at the National University of Singapore (NUS), chose to join. He was unveiled by Chiam as the "most courageous man in Singapore today" who would contest in the SDP's team in the Marine Parade by-election of 1992, against a PAP team led by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong.

Before Chee's entry onto the scene, fault lines in the SDP already had arisen over the issue of running the town councils that the SDP had won in 1991. Cracks were beginning to show in the marriage of convenience between the Wong Hong Toy clique from the Workers' Party and Chiam's SDP. In any case, the town council squabbles set off a series of events that ultimately combusted the SDP within a year—1993, the *annus horribilis* of the party.

Early that year, Chee went on a hunger strike after he had been

dismissed from NUS; it was alleged that he had misused research funds, and these accusations are examined in depth in this book. It was that very public hunger strike by Chee, who had recently become the SDP's assistant secretary-general and effectively Chiam's right-hand man, which inexorably split the SDP leadership into two camps, each of which held conflicting visions for the future of the party.

In the midst of attempts at reconciliation between the two factions, Chiam gave an explosive speech at the Singapore Press Club in which he denounced his SDP colleagues. That was the point of no return for the SDP, leading to the expulsion of Chiam from the party he had founded. Chiam challenged the SDP's decision in court and managed to have his membership of the SDP reinstated, thereby salvaging his parliamentary seat.

Along the way, Chiam's key charge was that Chee had been attempting to usurp his position as leader of the SDP, which Chee has vehemently denied ever since. In tracing the whole series of events in detail, this book reveals the complexities and intrigue of an intra-party power struggle that had set the opposition in Singapore back for almost a generation.

It is always tempting to entertain the counterfactuals. What if the SDP had not split? What if there had been no fights on the town council issues, or if Chee had not been dismissed by the NUS, which precipitated the SDP's fracture? The SDP might have then grown from strength to strength with a formidable team led by Chiam and Chee, perhaps to be met with reprisals from the PAP of the sort in Part II of this book. That may well have halted the SDP's advance, but it would certainly not have wiped it out of Parliament overnight.

Then again, counterfactuals can be an endless exercise in fantasy. We could even ask: how would things have turned out if Chee had joined the Workers' Party instead of the SDP ahead of the 1992 by-election in Marine Parade? That would not have been implausible if one considers how Chee's brand of more radical, rights-based politics has been far more in tune with Jeyaretnam's than Chiam's. But the Workers' Party was of course not the party in the ascendancy in 1992.

Towards a full understanding of the opposition's weakness

For sure, the political history of the Singapore opposition as presented in this book is but one piece in a bigger puzzle in explaining the dearth of the opposition's representation in Parliament.

Hussin Mutalib's 2003 book, *Parties and Politics*, is the seminal study of opposition parties in Singapore. Through extended interviews he conducted with essentially all the key opposition figures in Singapore since the 1960s, he has presented detailed case studies of four opposition parties, including the Workers' Party and the SDP. While emphasising the PAP government's tactics in diminishing and eliminating political opposition, Mutalib's analysis has also strongly indicated a cyclical development of the Singapore's opposition parties in terms of their rise and decline, given the numerous disagreements within and between different opposition parties.

None of these issues are unique to the opposition in Singapore of course. The PAP itself saw its fair share of conflict between its moderate and more left-wing factions from the late 1950s to 1961. And the idea that political parties anywhere in the world are harmonious, fraternal organisations is surely a myth. But Mutalib couples this explanation with the observation that "an affluent Singapore is a major factor to explain the Opposition's failure to undo the PAP's popular mandate."¹³

Furthermore, Mutalib has noted, Singapore's political culture is dominated by what he terms a "caution syndrome" and the "subject" mentality, where the citizenry has some knowledge of the political process but prefers not to participate in politics.

This political culture has been conceptualised by Chua Beng Huat as a form of "communitarian ideology" that emphasises society over the individual, which challenges the notion that modern democracies would necessarily develop into liberal societies that privilege individual rights, as suggested by many Western observers. In Chua's study of Singapore's public housing system, state capitalism and multiracial policies, he has outlined the pervasiveness of the Singapore state and its social redistributive policies.¹⁴

Two series of books on particular elections in Singapore have provided some of the most compelling analyses on the opposition as they relate to the workings of Singapore's politics. Derek da Cunha's *The Price of Victory* and *Breakthrough*, on the 1997 and 2011 general elections respectively, examine the electoral tactics and personalities of the PAP and the opposition against the background of economic and other election issues, coupled with a study of the election rallies that were held during that campaign, to arrive at his analysis of the election results and trajectory of Singapore's politics. While political scientists and analysts are not soothsayers, it is prescient for instance how da Cunha wrote in 1997 after the wipe-out of the SDP from Parliament about how "a window of opportunity, or a vacuum, exists for a new political party to come to the fore," made up of "professional and educated individuals with a commitment to politics in general," with the implication that such a new party would take a moderate rather than confrontational approach towards the PAP.¹⁵ Although not exactly a new party, it was a new leadership of the Workers' Party that found the winning formula in long lead-up to 2011 general election.

Kevin Tan's and Terence Lee's edited volumes *Voting in Change* and *Change in Voting*, on the 2011 and 2015 general elections respectively, brought together researchers and observers who examine issues and perspectives similar to what da Cunha had done, and including survey data where available. These two series of books notably eschew any overbearing framework of theories of democratisation cited earlier in this introduction that, as I have argued, are not well-suited to explaining Singapore's sui generis brand of politics.

The present predicament of Singapore's opposition parties also has its roots in earlier history. Writing in 1970, Thomas Bellows, regarded as the pioneer of academic studies on the PAP and, by extension, Singapore's politics, had offered an explanation of the opposition's decline through the 1960s. While acknowledging that the detentions under Operation Coldstore in 1963 had seriously crippled the main opposition Barisan Sosialis, Bellows identified Barisan's Chairman Lee

Siew Choh's decision to pursue an extra-parliamentary strategy of "mass struggle"—and the resultant "doctrinal struggle" within Barisan Sosialis that tore it apart—as the ultimate nail in the coffin for the opposition. Lee's foolhardy declaration of Barisan's boycott of Parliament starting from December 1965 "removed the party from what might have been its most effective position of influence"¹⁶ and, as we would see in hindsight, essentially guaranteed the PAP's monopoly of Parliament for the next 15 years. This was all the more odd given that it was Lee Siew Choh himself, as Bellows pointed out, who presented very compelling reasons why a strategy of "mass struggle" would fail in Singapore when he was still PAP assemblyman in 1961, albeit from the standpoint of a Communist mass struggle then. Lee's reasoning was three-pronged—that it would be impossible to have a Communist Singapore without a Communist Malaya; that the anti-Communist forces in Singapore were militarily superior; and that the entrepôt economy of Singapore was "inextricably linked up with, and entirely dependent on the goodwill of anti-Communist countries."¹⁷

The similarities between Barisan Sosialis's predicament in 1965 and the SDP's in 1993 are uncanny, perhaps a vindication of Mutalib's observation of the cyclical pattern of development of opposition parties in Singapore. After the train of events involving Chiam's expulsion from the SDP, the party embarked on a strategy of what Chee Soon Juan described as "civil disobedience"—during which the SDP had never succeeded in getting into Parliament, even though other opposition parties did.

Conclusion: a second wave?

By writing of a first wave of democratic awakening in Singapore, the natural question would be whether a second wave is already on-going with the victories of Low Thia Kiang's Workers' Party in 2011, and how a second wave could ebb and flow like the first. For a credible study of that, some time and distance would be more than desirable. Low is covered only tangentially in this book, even though his parliamentary career began in 1991 in the midst of the first wave, though that is certainly not

an indication of the impact on Singapore politics he has made. Rather, it is because Low's leadership of the Workers' Party since 2001 has taken such an independent life from Jeyaretnam and Chiam for that to call for a separate account.

Meanwhile, the experiences and lessons of the first wave, and the questions they pose to us, should offer us much material for reflection.

PROLOGUE

1 March 1985

Parliament sessions were televised for the first time in Singapore. *Today in Parliament* became such a hit on prime-time television that the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation subsequently extended its original half-hour running time to 45 minutes. “Politics, the ruling party and Government have been made human through television coverage,” a *Straits Times* report pronounced.¹

“I don’t really trust the newspapers,” one viewer said. “On television, it’s warts and all. TV captures them in the raw, and there’s no retake.”²

“I didn’t watch every session on TV,” admitted one young professional. “But if I knew that Mr Chiam See Tong was going to speak, I’d watch because I want to know how he is performing.”³

Speaking to viewers, the *Sunday Times* found J. B. Jeyaretnam to be regarded as one of the particularly impressive speakers in the inaugural parliamentary broadcast. In equal measure, Jeyaretnam’s detractors thought that he had been given too much airtime.⁴

The sixth Parliament opened 25 February 1985 after an eventful general election had been fought the previous December. For the first time at a general election after Singapore’s independence, opposition politicians were elected. Moreover, this took place against the backdrop of an unprecedented swing of 12.5 per cent against the ruling PAP. J. B. Jeyaretnam of the

Workers' Party had been returned in Anson, against all odds and despite the PAP's vow to "expose, demolish, and destroy" him.⁵ The other opposition Member of Parliament (MP) was Chiam See Tong, the secretary-general of the SDP, the party that he had founded in 1980. He was the lawyer who, when he first entered politics in the late 1970s, went around Singapore in his trademark Volkswagen Beetle with his loudhailer, telling Singaporeans that one-party rule was not their destiny.

The fierce debates between government and opposition in the chamber in the 1950s and early 60s had receded into the public's memory, simply because there had been no opposition for most of the years since then. The days of the opposition Barisan Sosialis, and of fiery politicians like David Marshall, the first chief minister of Singapore, and Ong Eng Guan, the first mayor of Singapore and renegade member of the PAP, were long over.

The homogeneous make-up of Parliament since independence was not limited to party representation. There had also not been a single woman in the House since 1970, when Chan Choy Siong, the PAP MP for Delta, retired. The general election of 1984 broke that long spell with the election of Aline Wong, Dixie Tan and Yu-Foo Yee Shoon of the PAP.

As at the start of the first session of every Parliament, members debated the address of the President—then C. V. Devan Nair—to the House, delivered on behalf of the government as is the convention in Westminster parliamentary systems. Tan Cheng Bock, the MP for Ayer Rajah, who moved the motion for the debate in 1985, was known to have sparred with ministers a number of times in the previous Parliament on what he considered to be elitist policies.⁶ The party's choice for him to kick off the debate seemed to hint at a recognition of the shifting political landscape. "Since 1963, the people have given this Government a blank cheque," he boldly said. "But today, after 25 years of nation-building, there is an erosion in this faith and trust in the Government... Many Singaporeans felt left behind because they could not follow the pace of change, and they resented this."⁷

Voters appeared to defy the ruling party by voting in two opposition

MPs in 1984. This was in reaction to a raft of unpopular policies, such as the proposed delayed withdrawal of retirement savings, which were delivered by tough-talking ministers. At the opening of Parliament in 1985, there was a certain air of change, in anticipation of more debate to follow, not only from the two opposition MPs but also emboldened PAP backbenchers. It would have been foolhardy if the PAP had continued their tough talk. Doing so in the aftermath of their defeat in the 1981 Anson by-election only reinforced the trajectory of their dipping performance in the popular vote in the subsequent general election.

Yet the government's decision to begin screening Parliament sessions on television was counterintuitive to some who believed that Chiam "won his parliamentary seat on television" when Chiam warned of the dangers of overly rapid economic development and of empty Central Provident Fund (CPF) accounts—the mandatory savings plan for Singaporeans.⁸ Why would the government afford Chiam more media exposure now? Surely it was an admission on the part of the government that television coverage, with its more visceral impact and its greater viewership numbers than newspaper circulation, was too important to ignore by now. Nonetheless, the definitive move to televise parliamentary sittings arose from a challenge Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew had made to Jeyaretnam in July the previous year, when Lee said that "no press man in the gallery can convey [Jeyaretnam's] sloppy, slovenly, ill-prepared presentation."⁹

Jeyaretnam, the leader of the Workers' Party, had been in Parliament since 1981, initially as the sole opposition MP. He doggedly challenged the government on a range of issues. Immediately, from his maiden parliamentary speech in December 1981, Jeyaretnam and Lee Kuan Yew engaged in aggressive and ugly debates that earned each other's intense dislike. Jeyaretnam thought Lee Kuan Yew dictatorial while Lee saw him as a "poseur, always seeking attention, good or bad."¹⁰

A case in point would be the acerbic exchanges between the two men right from the start of the debate on the President's Address that year. After Tan Cheng Bock, who moved the motion, Jeyaretnam was next to speak. When addressing constitutional rights, Jeyaretnam cited the case of Guyana

and was immediately met by the caustic response from the Prime Minister, who said, “They have got all the fine, fundamental rights written into their Constitution. What kind of lives do their people live?”¹¹

Jeyaretnam had been relegated to a back seat in the previous Parliament. It felt almost as if the PAP were still in denial that an opposition politician had made it into Parliament and were trying to conceal his presence. This time, however, he, along with Chiam, was given a prominent seat on the front bench across the government’s side, following the Westminster tradition of seating the opposition.

In another unprecedented move, President Devan Nair had invited both Chiam and Jeyaretnam to lunch in February 1985, before the new Parliament was sworn in.¹² Back in the years he was in the heat of party politics, Nair was hard hitting against the opposition, particularly against those very two men who were the front runners of Singapore’s opposition. In fact, Nair’s seat of Anson, which he had held before his elevation to the presidency, had been won by Jeyaretnam at the 1981 by-election. At the time of that by-election, Nair appeared to have softened considerably towards the opposition. In later years, Nair recounted his lunch meeting with Lee Kuan Yew the day after the by-election, during which he had tried, unsuccessfully, to placate the furious Prime Minister by saying that the opposition still constituted no threat to the PAP government.¹³ Nair seemed to be striking a more conciliatory tone towards his former adversaries, especially now that he was technically above politics in the non-partisan, ceremonial head-of-state role of President. In his speech at the investiture of the new Cabinet early in 1985, he said he hoped that “the next Parliament will see positive signs from both sides of the House,” even remarking that “how Singapore’s parliamentary system will further develop depends first upon the way the government accepts the role of the loyal opposition.”¹⁴

As Nair’s demeanour towards the opposition softened, some other PAP figures became more vocal towards, or even outrightly critical of, the PAP government. The key figure in this regard was Toh Chin Chye, a founding member of the PAP and its former chairman, and also a former deputy

prime minister, whom Lee Kuan Yew had dropped from the Cabinet after the 1980 general election. Lee’s stated motive for that was the renewal of the PAP leadership, though nothing could placate Toh’s very public disdain for a PAP that he felt was deviating from its socialist roots. In the lead-up to the 1984 general election, there were rumours, publicly acknowledged even by the tightly controlled press, that he would resign from the PAP and run as an independent candidate.¹⁵ This, it was suggested, was because his criticisms of the PAP and its policies had “allegedly exceeded the tolerance of the ruling party” and had become a “dissident to be ousted from his party.”¹⁶ In any case, that did not materialise, and Toh was re-elected in his seat of Rochore on the PAP ticket.

In the new Parliament of 1985, Chiam was assigned to be seated next to Toh Chin Chye in the front bench directly opposite the Cabinet ministers, almost as if in acknowledgement of the critical role Toh had played alongside Chiam and Jeyaretnam in challenging government policies since the early 1980s. Chiam remembered him as a “quiet, humble and reserved gentleman”¹⁷ whose personal exchanges with those around him in Parliament were kept to a minimum.

Once he took to the dispatch box, though, Toh was in a different mode. His critiques of the PAP’s “elitist policies” were delivered with gravitas, armed with his years of knowledge of the inner workings of government, of policies and of the Prime Minister himself. His old colleague and contemporary, S. Rajaratnam, who was by then senior minister, acknowledged, however, that Toh’s criticisms of the PAP were “sincere and well-considered.” He even lauded Toh as a possible model for the political opposition.¹⁸

Such deference, however, was not afforded to Jek Yeun Thong, another PAP stalwart from its early years and a former Cabinet minister, who had similarly turned critical of the PAP government. Jek had returned fully to the political fray after a stint as High Commissioner to the United Kingdom while retaining his Queenstown parliamentary seat. (The PAP had announced in the lead-up to the 1984 general election that its practice of appointing some MPs as ambassadors overseas would stop, so that they could “serve their constituents at home.”¹⁹ Of the last

four MP-ambassadors, Jek Yeun Thong was the only one who chose to return to Parliament rather than retire from politics.) Jek took the PAP to task on a range of issues from the proposed delay of the withdrawal age of CPF retirement funds to the use of hanyu pinyin to teach Chinese in schools.

This earned him an equally lengthy diatribe from Rajaratnam, who chastised Jek for his oppositional stance towards his own party; “a more suitable sport for Mr Chiam,” Rajaratnam said. “What need was there for the Member for Queenstown, who rode in on the PAP horse, to play the same game?”²⁰ Jek retaliated by asking who was the one getting senile—Rajaratnam had once, in his speech, mistakenly referred to Jek as a minister—and suggested that Rajaratnam was also possibly “hard of hearing.”²¹ To Jek, senior PAP ministers were making a mockery of Parliament by telling members what criticisms to make and what not to.²²

The Jek–Rajaratnam exchange was televised and widely watched, and such open confrontation and name-calling within the ruling party’s ranks was a clear departure from the standard speeches of PAP backbenchers of previous years, who were almost at pains not to sound critical of party leaders. This show of discipline among PAP backbenchers was understandable, given that they had an incentive to “catch the eye of senior party leaders through [their] performances at question time in Parliament,” and, to use the metaphor of the classroom, “await the teacher’s recognition and promotion according to merit,” as one observer put it.²³

In a way, the public may have been awakened to political debate at the sight of senior leaders and former leaders of the PAP openly disagreeing and arguing between themselves on prime-time television. But the MPs, including Toh Chin Chye and Jek Yeun Thong, were naturally obliged to vote with the PAP on parliamentary bills, motions and resolutions. The party whip is the mechanism enforced by a party official to ensure that all its members vote according to the party line during Parliament sittings, with the implicit threat of expulsion from the party if such discipline is not adhered to. Some watching the televised Parliament sittings were dismayed

at what they deemed to be the hypocrisy of MPs, like Jek Yeun Thong, who did not vote in accordance with what they preached.²⁴

The public thus trained its sight on Chiam and Jeyaretnam, the two men at the front of the first wave of democratic awakening in post-independence Singapore.

PART I

**BEGINNING OF THE WAVE
(1981-1984)**

1

THE OPPOSITION RETURNS

Jeyaretnam's parliamentary debut

After winning the 1981 Anson by-election,¹ Jeyaretnam declared that he wanted one half of the Parliament chamber to be reserved just for him as he was the sole opposition MP. On the other half of the chamber, all the 74 PAP MPs would have to be accommodated under his plan.² This would appear to accentuate the design of the Westminster-style Parliament chamber that Singapore used, where the opposition would be seated opposite the government benches, although this was expressly not why the “Mother of Parliaments” in London was set up as such.³ Nevertheless, it was the kind of grandiose statement that Singaporeans had come to expect of their most ferocious opposition politician. As it turned out, though, Jeyaretnam was relegated to a corner seat in the Parliament chamber. It would seem that the PAP government was still in denial of the opposition's return into Parliament, 15 years after the last opposition MP had walked out.

On 22 December 1981, Jeyaretnam strode into the Parliament chamber and took his oath. Just a few parliamentary questions into the sitting, he tackled Lee Yock Suan, then the Minister of State for National Development. On the conservancy and service charges collected by the Housing and Development Board (HDB), Jeyaretnam asked why there was a need for an increase even though the HDB had made a profit in excess of \$32 million the previous year. Lee replied that “accounts do not

completely reflect the situation.” On the HDB’s sale of old flats, Jeyaretnam asked why they were being transacted at current market value, whereas the Ministry of Finance was able to sell old flats under their Housing and Urban Development Company (HUDC) at cost price at the time they had been built in the 1970s. Lee told him to ask the Minister for Finance.⁴ Those parliamentary questions had been filed by PAP MPs before the sitting, but Jeyaretnam entered the fray in a manner that must have unsettled a Minister of State with no experience debating with the parliamentary opposition.

Before Jeyaretnam had been elected to Parliament, the PAP backbenchers played the role of the opposition, said Teo Chong Tee, the PAP MP for Changi from 1976 to 1996, and at one time a parliamentary secretary. “We also spoke quite freely,” said Teo. “When I was sitting in the backbench, I liked to raise a lot of localised issues because my constituency was affected by major redevelopment and resettlement had to take place.” But when Jeyaretnam entered Parliament—and Chiam See Tong later in 1985—the PAP backbenchers had to be “a little bit more sensitive in wanting to say things,” lest “the two guys would jump on the bandwagon and join us in attacking the Ministers,” Teo said.⁵ That also meant that the PAP backbenchers began to pre-empt the ministers in advance as to the issues they would raise in Parliament.

Lee Kuan Yew versus Jeyaretnam

Jeyaretnam’s full maiden speech in Parliament took place later that same day, when he rose to speak on the Prevention of Corruption (Amendment) Bill that was being tabled for its second reading.

“Mr Speaker, Sir, I am glad that on this, my first speech in this House, I am able to compliment the Government in its efforts and determination to stamp out corruption and I can assure the Government and the Members of this House of my Party’s support in all that the Government does to stamp out corruption in this land of ours,” he began. “But what we do not always approve are the methods that are used by the law enforcement agencies when they go about carrying out the task assigned to them, and the CPIB is no exception.”

Jeyaretnam spoke on how the increased powers that the bill would give to officers of the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) could “open the door to innocent persons being convicted” and to the “fabrication of evidence under pressure.”

In his lengthy speech, Jeyaretnam also proposed a new clause in the bill to require all MPs to make a statutory declaration of all their assets, and that of their spouses and children, in the spirit of stamping out corruption.

Then he said there had been a “close identification of a political party with the Government”—in reference to the PAP—in which “facilities and services provided for and paid out of public funds are put at the disposal of this party.” He called for this to be made punishable as he deemed it corruption. Upon that utterance, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew leapt to the dispatch box.

- LEE KUAN YEW:** Mr Speaker, Sir, can I ask the Member if he will give specific instances? I will take action on them forthwith.
- J. B. JEYARETNAM:** Mr Speaker, Sir, the instances are the use by the party of Government land and premises at Napier Road.
- LEE:** Yes, carry on.
- JEYARETNAM:** And also the use by the Hon. Prime Minister in his election campaign last year, in December 1980, of police vehicles and police personnel.
- LEE:** What else?
- JEYARETNAM:** I will content myself with those two, if I may.
- LEE:** Do I understand the Member for Anson to seriously suggest that the PAP is using Government property in Napier Road without a proper lease with the Government? And is he suggesting that I campaigned in the last General Elections using police vehicles? These are grave charges.

JEYARETNAM: Mr Speaker, Sir, I have not been acquainted with the terms and conditions under which the People's Action Party is using the premises at Napier Road.

LEE: Then will you withdraw that?

The Prime Minister then called for a commission of inquiry, in which either the government would be found guilty of Jeyaretnam's charges, or Jeyaretnam would be found to be a "liar and a hypocrite."

"Mr Speaker, Sir, am I not allowed to raise questions in this House?" Jeyaretnam protested.

"What I will not have, Mr Speaker, Sir," Lee said, "is what, I am sure, we are going to have in the next three to four years, and we will have it ad nauseam and the Member will get it back from me ad nauseam—a direct challenge to prove in an open court or a Commission of Inquiry. I will not put up with innuendoes and insinuations. He made one in 1976 and he has not learned from that lesson."

Lee was referring to the defamation lawsuit he had brought against Jeyaretnam for remarks made at a Workers' Party campaign rally at the 1976 general election. Jeyaretnam had insinuated that Tat Lee Bank was able to obtain a banking licence from the Monetary Authority of Singapore two years earlier only because the bank's legal advisor was Lee & Lee, the law firm co-founded by Lee Kuan Yew, his wife and his brother Lee Kim Yew, the last of whom was incidentally also one of the proposed directors of Tat Lee Bank.

Jeyaretnam lost the case, which was heard in 1978, and the judge ordered him to pay Lee \$130,000 in damages and costs. He appealed against the ruling in the High Court as well as to the Privy Council in London, but lost both appeals too. It brought his liability for damages and costs up to a staggering amount of \$500,000, which forced him to sell his bungalow home in Bukit Timah and move into a rented apartment.

The personal animosity between Lee and Jeyaretnam was completely mutual. During the 1978 trial, Jeyaretnam's lawyer, the Queen's Counsel

John Mortimer, had asked Lee whether he was trying to bankrupt the Workers' Party leader. Lee replied that "not even \$200,000 would bankrupt him," suggesting that Jeyaretnam was very well off.⁶ However, Margaret, Jeyaretnam's wife, was diagnosed with cancer around the time of the trial, and he would need money for her treatment. Moreover, his legal practice had not been doing well since he joined the Workers' Party, ostensibly because potential clients feared being represented by an opposition politician in court.⁷

But somehow, Jeyaretnam was sure that Lee had known about his wife's illness—despite having no such evidence—and therefore took bitter offence at Lee's remarks, which he regarded as a personal affront.⁸ Margaret had thought of returning to her native England as it became increasingly apparent that the treatment was not working, but decided to stay on in Singapore, even accompanying her husband on each day of the Tat Lee trial. She died in 1980, never to have been able to celebrate Jeyaretnam's victory in Anson with him.

Jeyaretnam was always emotional on issues of justice. As his biographer Chris Lydgate wrote, Jeyaretnam would feel a dull rage burn inside him whenever he sensed that there had been a miscarriage of justice.⁹ As a lawyer, he found it hard to detach himself emotionally from his cases at times. In one instance, he lost his temper in court and refused to sit down despite being ordered to do so by the judge.¹⁰ The pursuit of social justice formed Jeyaretnam's whole *raison d'être* for entering opposition politics. In a 2002 interview, he said: "I thought if I wanted to be true to my calling as a Christian, I had to do something about all the wrongs in society around me. Margaret was also angry at the injustices. So I said I just have to do it, that's all."¹¹

While that was all good and noble, the problem was when Jeyaretnam, by his own admission, would "shoot from the hip" on wrong information.¹² Most infamously in 1986, Jeyaretnam condemned the PAP government in Parliament for wrongfully detaining a labourer by the name of Lim Poh Huat for 15 hours without giving him access to his family or a lawyer, purportedly for the simple reason of not having his identity card on him—

only to find out that it had been a complete fabrication by Lim himself. It turned out that Lim had cooked up the story in order to explain why he turned up late at a client's house for renovation works. Yet Jeyaretnam refused to back down when confronted with the facts, and even suggested that Lim could have been coerced into making the confession that he fabricated the story of his arrest.¹³ When asked about the affair years later, Jeyaretnam remained unrepentant, while continuing to insist it had much to do with the opposition being routinely denied access to information.¹⁴ It was instances like the “Lim Poh Huat affair” that led Lee to brand Jeyaretnam a “charlatan” who had to be exposed for being “dishonest”.¹⁵

Jeyaretnam: the road to Parliament

In 1971, as Jeyaretnam was in the midst of a successful legal practice, he was approached by a group from the Workers' Party to lead them in reviving the dormant party. Co-founded by David Marshall back in 1957 after he had resigned as Singapore's first chief minister, the Workers' Party was to be Marshall's new political vehicle after he fell out with Lim Yew Hock, his fellow Labour Front colleague and successor as chief minister. Despite some success at the party's first electoral outing in the Singapore City Council elections of 1957, Marshall the anti-communist was to be plagued by what he himself admitted was infiltration of the Workers' Party by “left-wing extremists.”¹⁶ He returned to Parliament in 1961 for a short stint—incidentally in a by-election in Anson constituency just as Jeyaretnam himself was to enter Parliament two decades later. But he quit the party shortly before the 1963 general election, and contested Anson as an independent candidate. He polled poorly and even lost his election deposit, and never stood in an election again. After Marshall's departure, the Workers' Party also faded from the limelight, although a small group of grassroots activists sustained it and fielded a handful of candidates at the 1963 and 1968 general elections, before Jeyaretnam arrived on the scene.

Jeyaretnam was known for his independent streak for much of his legal career, a quality that attracted the Workers' Party members to eventually elect him as their new secretary-general. During his tenure as a magistrate

in the 1950s, he had made judgements that sometimes went against the government of the day. At the height of the British colonial administrators' campaign against opium addiction in Singapore, he acquitted a man charged under the Dangerous Drugs Ordinance for “frequenting an opium den” because the prosecutor could not prove that he had been there more than once. He felt that his job was to apply the law correctly rather than to be overzealous in its interpretation, and to ensure the accused was given a fair trial accordingly.¹⁷

It was as a judge that Jeyaretnam had one of his early encounters with Lee Kuan Yew, a lawyer then who once appeared before him in court, and who impressed Jeyaretnam with his brilliance as well as his anti-colonial politics. “I was supportive of Lee and his party and what he stood for in those days,” Jeyaretnam said.¹⁸

However, Jeyaretnam grew disillusioned when the PAP took power in Singapore because of the PAP's detention of leftist politicians under the Preservation of Public Security Ordinance and to its various actions such as the abolition of the jury system except in cases involving the death penalty. It was also personal—Jeyaretnam believed that he had been passed over for promotion in the legal service on two occasions because of the PAP government's displeasure during a commission of inquiry back in 1959 on the donation of over \$700,000 from an American source received by Labour Front education minister Chew Swee Kee.¹⁹ While there was no dispute as to Chew receiving that donation, which he had declared to the comptroller of income tax, the issue was how the confidential tax records of a government minister was leaked to the PAP, a political opponent, which then publicised the information to imply that Chew was an American proxy. That destroyed him and the Labour Front politically. Jeyaretnam's role was to defend the Income Tax Department against the charge of leaking confidential information, which he did stoutly. In his cross-examination, he had tried to implicate Kenneth Byrne, a high-ranking government official who went on to become a PAP election candidate, for the leak.²⁰

Jeyaretnam resigned from the bench in 1963 to practise law privately, working in a few renowned firms before setting up his own practice. That

was when he became known in legal circles for taking on unpopular cases, such as in his defence of an armed robbery in the very first death penalty case in Singapore after the complete abolition of trial by jury in 1969.

There was much excitement over Jeyaretnam's revival of the Workers' Party among Singaporeans eager for a strong challenge to the PAP, which had held a monopoly of seats in Parliament for a few years. Hopes were dashed at the 1972 general election, when the Workers' Party and the opposition as a whole fared poorly against the PAP, which garnered over 70 per cent of the popular vote. Even Jeyaretnam's own results in Farrer Park constituency, while among the top-scoring opposition candidates, was only 23.1 per cent. This sparked some dissension among those who started to question Jeyaretnam's leadership of the Workers' Party after the initial euphoria, resulting in a faction of about 200 members splintering to form the United Front, a new party. For a membership of 554, that was a blow for the Workers' Party.²¹

For Jeyaretnam, much of this was pinned down to the rumours that the Workers' Party was funded by nefarious foreign elements, after the PAP candidate for Paya Lebar, Tay Boon Too, was reported to have said during a rally that the Workers' Party had received \$600,000 from a Malaysian source. Jeyaretnam was particularly furious because the party had in fact only \$4,000 in its bank account, which made campaigning a challenge. Moreover, the rumours were tearing party unity apart.

And so Jeyaretnam sued Tay Boon Too for libel. The relentless cycle of lawsuits with the PAP leaders, in which Jeyaretnam was to be embroiled throughout his political career, thus began with a suit that he himself had commenced. However, Jeyaretnam's suit was overturned in court because he was unable to quote the exact words of Tay's original speech, which had been delivered in Hokkien. What Jeyaretnam had relied on were the translations of Tay's speech into English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil in the media. He was ordered to pay Tay's legal costs.

In the following general election in 1976, Jeyaretnam was more geared up for electoral battle, but suffered from the PAP's last-minute switch of candidate in Kampong Chai Chee constituency, where it substituted Sha'ari

Tadin, who had polled just 52.4 per cent in the constituency in the previous general election, for a stronger candidate, Fong Sip Chee, who had polled 71.8 per cent in his. Jeyaretnam learnt his lesson, and for every election after that, he always kept his cards as close to his chest as possible, revealing his choice of constituency to contest as late as possible. He would go through failed electoral outings at two by-elections before finally winning the Anson by-election, the seat vacated by the PAP MP Devan Nair before he became President of Singapore.

Why did Jeyaretnam take a long period of 10 years to win his first seat in Parliament? Quite apart from the difficulties the PAP had thrown to its opponents, one reason perhaps was Jeyaretnam's political naivety at the beginning. Of course, Jeyaretnam was known for espousing liberal causes such as fighting for the freedom of speech—S. Rajaratnam ridiculed him as a “pukka English gentleman”²²—which were not only finding little traction in a recently-independent Singapore in nation-building mode, but had come across as being too abstract for working class Singaporeans who constituted his party base. His party was, after all, the *Workers' Party*.

But his performance at his debut press conference in 1971 betrayed his political inexperience. He called for a more liberal immigration policy, thinking that families were still aggrieved at being split apart in the aftermath of Singapore's separation from Malaysia, but this was a major concern of only of a minority of Singaporeans insufficient to form any political base for him. Jeyaretnam also called for a crackdown on corruption, even though the PAP was already known for its tough stance on corruption. Worst of all, in reaction to a speech the following year by Lee Kuan Yew on the importance of National Service to Singapore's defence,²³ Jeyaretnam said that “nobody seems to have asked the question whether our present way of life in Singapore is worth defending.”²⁴ That set the stage for the PAP to attack him as unpatriotic. Popularly known by the public by his initials “JB” and by closer associates as “JB”, Jeyaretnam then became mocked as “Johor Bahru Jeyaretnam” in the media, because of his frequent visits to the Malaysian city where he spent part of his early life and where his sister still lived, and now because of his presumed disloyalty to Singapore.²⁵

The most prescient reading of Jeyaretnam at this time came perhaps from David Marshall, his predecessor as leader of the Workers' Party, and a former colleague in whose law firm Jeyaretnam worked after resigning from the bench. While praising Jeyaretnam as "a man of complete honesty,"²⁶ Marshall once suggested that Jeyaretnam's problem was his refusal to concede that the PAP had done anything right.²⁷ Marshall said:

It is my hope that he will contribute constructively to the political maturation of our people, but in my view this can only be done if he firmly rejects any attempt to create phoney issues for political capital and never hesitates to give credit to his opponents where credit is earned.

I know this is not the tradition of Singapore politics.

It is, however, the only healthy approach to the creation of a climate where differing minds can loyally co-operate instead of polarising destructive antagonism.²⁸

2

ALONE IN THE HOUSE

Jeyaretnam in Parliament, 1982–4

However politically naïve Jeyaretnam may have been in his salad days heading the Workers' Party, he had a knack for picking out the salient issues on which to pin the PAP ministers for answers once he entered Parliament—an ability no doubt built up over his career as a judge and then a lawyer.

Jeyaretnam was perhaps most dogged in his pursuit on issues relating to people connected to the PAP and the establishment more generally. He kept raising questions about what the police were doing to apprehend Phey Yew Kok, the former PAP MP for Boon Teck and chairman of the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), who had absconded in 1979 after he was charged with criminal breach of trust. When he asked for a commission of inquiry on the Phey case in Parliament in March 1982, Lee Kuan Yew faulted his legal understanding, because such an inquiry could jeopardise the due process law, and Phey could then claim that a fair trial had been prejudiced. Lee said Jeyaretnam was trying to smear the government by alleging there had been a cover-up. While Lee did offer to hold a commission of inquiry, but only on the condition that it not touch on the facts and evidence of the charges against Phey, Jeyaretnam did not respond.¹ He probably thought that such an inquiry would be meaningless, and he had made his point in Parliament anyway. Over the ensuing years in Parliament, Jeyaretnam would periodically ask Chua Sian Chin, the

Minister for Home Affairs, for updates on police efforts to capture Phey. It was only in 2015 that Phey was to finally turn himself in at the Singapore embassy in Bangkok, in the country he had been hiding in.²

After S. R. Nathan, the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was appointed the executive chairman of the *Straits Times*, Jeyaretnam cited in Parliament the senior civil servant's new role as a sign of a clamp down on news that could be considered critical of the government. He was referring to Nathan's one-time role as director of the security and intelligence division at the Ministry of Defence. "I do not know whether he has any experience of editing newspapers," said Jeyaretnam.³ He went one step further and alluded to Nathan's work as an interpreter for the Japanese police during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore. That incensed Nathan, who felt Jeyaretnam had slandered him by insinuating that he was complicit in atrocities committed during the Japanese Occupation. Nathan wrote an open letter challenging Jeyaretnam to repeat his remarks outside Parliament, where he would not be protected from libel action. Nathan also pointed out he had in fact worked in the Japanese police department in Johor Bahru, not the Kempeitei in Singapore—in the same building as Jeyaretnam, who himself had also worked for the Japanese wartime administration—but which he felt Jeyaretnam had conveniently omitted to mention.⁴ Jeyaretnam responded that he was only questioning Nathan's suitability for the running of a media outfit.⁵ (Years later, after Nathan became the President of Singapore, he surprised many when he turned up to pay his respects at Jeyaretnam's wake in 2008.)⁶

Jeyaretnam also questioned the government on the promotion in 1983 of Colonel Lee Hsien Loong, the eldest son of Lee Kuan Yew, to the rank of brigadier-general, the youngest in Singapore's history. In particular, Jeyaretnam asked about the duration of Lee's active service in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) prior to his promotion, and how that compared with those of similar rank in other armies around the world. Lee Hsien Loong had resigned from the SAF in September 1984 and then announced that he was contesting the upcoming general election as a candidate of the PAP.⁷ Goh Keng Swee, joining in the debate as the former Minister for Defence,

accused Jeyaretnam for insinuating that the promotion of Lee Hsien Loong to the rank of brigadier-general was "motivated by unworthy considerations, such as a move to accelerate his career in the political field or by virtue of his relationship with the Prime Minister," and challenged Jeyaretnam to repeat the insinuation outside of Parliament.⁸

Beyond personalities, defence issues were another main preoccupation of Jeyaretnam's, whose views on the subject reflected his liberalist stance. In January 1984, he questioned Goh Chok Tong, then the Minister for Defence, on the government's purchase of E-2C and F-16 aircraft, characterising it as an "arms build-up quite out of proportion to what is possible for the defence of Singapore." Jeyaretnam suggested that the money could have been spent on subsidising health care costs for the needy instead.⁹ This spawned a debate in which Goh and the PAP government, in turn, questioned Jeyaretnam's commitment to the defence of Singapore, which had been a consistent thread in the PAP's attacks on Jeyaretnam since the 1970s. Indeed, in his political manifestos over the years, Jeyaretnam had frequently questioned the government's defence expenditure, as well as whether the "hardship" caused by National Service was justifiable.¹⁰

Constitutional issues were naturally another area of interest for Jeyaretnam. In October 1984, he quizzed Lee Kuan Yew on his remarks at that year's National Day Rally speech that the government was contemplating constitutional amendments to have the President of Singapore be popularly elected rather than be elected only by Parliament, and to endow the President with powers to protect and control the country's reserves. Putting Lee's own words back to him—Lee's belief that the Constitution should not be tinkered with too often, which Lee had said as recently as July of that year—Jeyaretnam asked Lee when he had had the "brain wave" of a popularly elected President for Singapore. He accused Lee of trying to asphyxiate a future non-PAP government of any use of the national reserves because of his "nightmares of another government taking over." Despite Jeyaretnam provoking him to reveal more about the government's plans, Lee would only say that "we cross our bridges when we come to them." Lee alluded to a

process in which a white paper would be produced and debated, and then a referendum be held on any constitutional changes.¹¹ The issue would only be revisited more intensively by the government in the lead-up to the 1988 general election (see Chapter 8).

Jeyaretnam also raised in Parliament the local issues he faced in Anson. He had applied for a police permit to hold a parade celebrating the Mid-Autumn Festival in his constituency, which was granted except for his request to have lion dancers included. Jeyaretnam complied accordingly, but was astonished to see on that day that his PAP opponent from the 1981 Anson by-election, Pang Kim Hin, was holding a rival parade that included lion dancers. Upon enquiring with the police, Jeyaretnam was enraged to learn that Pang had not even applied for a permit for his parade at all. Jeyaretnam raised the issue in Parliament with Chua Sian Chin, the Minister for Home Affairs, who refused to answer the question and instead made reference to Jeyaretnam being charged and convicted for “defrauding creditors.”¹² An argument ensued between Jeyaretnam and Chua, as to whether that court case in question was sub judice, in which the Speaker of Parliament ruled in favour of Jeyaretnam. Still, Chua never answered Jeyaretnam’s original question. Jeyaretnam called for a vote to settle the issue, but all the PAP MPs simply voted against his motion.

Jeyaretnam’s frequent interjections and occasionally lengthy speeches in Parliament were clearly a thorn in the flesh of the PAP, leading Lee Kuan Yew to mark his speeches as “the pestilence that from time to time spews out from that corner of the House.”¹³ He even characterised Jeyaretnam as an “underdog” who had morphed into a “mangy dog” in Parliament,¹⁴ and other PAP MPs followed suit in applying the derogatory term on the opposition MP.¹⁵

Finally, there were two major policies of the PAP government that were so controversial and unpopular that even PAP backbenchers assailed them as Jeyaretnam did. But unlike the PAP backbenchers, who would eventually vote in Parliament in support of those policies by virtue of the PAP party whip, Jeyaretnam was the only MP who could make his vote count.

The graduate mothers scheme

At his 1983 National Day Rally speech, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew started what the press was to call the “Great Marriage Debate.” He spoke about the declining marriage and fertility rates of educated women, especially graduates, and identified the problem as one of educated men tending to choose life partners who were their “education equal or inferior” and seldom his “educational superior,” citing a Ministry of Education survey.¹⁶ To rectify this, his government would introduce a slew of policies in the ensuing months, such as income tax relief for married women who had five or more ‘O’-Level passes and who had children, while also giving women with little education monetary incentives if they agreed to be sterilised. The following year, the Social Development Unit (SDU) was formed to promote matchmaking between graduate men and women. But the scheme that garnered the most controversy and the most emotive response was the “graduate mothers scheme” in which the enrolment of children into Primary One would be separated into categories depending on the level of education received by their mothers. The idea was to give graduate mothers priority in the registration of their children in schools of their choice that were deemed to be good schools. This led to comic situations of husbands lugging framed certificates of their wives’ university degrees into the Ministry of Education building when registering their children for Primary One, as the *Singapore Monitor* observed.¹⁷

Some graduate women protested that they were put unfairly under pressure by the government to maintain their careers while supporting larger families.¹⁸ But the overwhelming criticism of the scheme came from a broad spectrum of society. The Roman Catholic Church came out against the policy, as did university students and unions which were normally acquiescent, politically, in post-independence Singapore.¹⁹ The World Bank even entered the fray to criticise the scheme in their World Development Report for 1984, observing that if it were true that highly-educated parents would produce more intelligent children, the average human intelligence of humankind would have been falling over the past 100 years, since better educated parents have typically fewer children. “But it does not appear to

be so,” it said.²⁰ A family planning campaigner from Thailand called it a “special horse breeding programme,”²¹ though he was likely only alluding to how Ong Teng Cheong himself described the graduate mothers scheme.²²

“Don’t bar my child, it’s not her fault,” implored a letter-writer to the *Straits Times* who was a graduate mother and a divorcée, and who had been told that her child had to register for Primary One in the category of the non-graduate mothers.²³ (“Exceptions cannot be extended indefinitely,” came the stony reply from the Ministry of Education.²⁴)

Lee did seem to anticipate the backlash towards such a controversial policy, when he said during his 1983 National Day Rally speech, “I don’t want to be misunderstood.”

“I think everybody has the right to be represented in the next generation,” he said. “That is my complaint—that the educated are not having themselves reproduced in the same proportions.”²⁵

Lee Kuan Yew famously said that Singapore “would not have made economic progress if we had not intervened on very personal matters.”²⁶ While Lee’s mantra was bound to have its proponents and detractors, there was something qualitatively different about the graduate mothers scheme which simply rendered it unworkable in the way he rationalised it to—because of the raw emotions it solicited from the public by virtue of its moral and deeply personal implications.

Tay Eng Soon, the Minister of State for Education, tried to calm anxious non-graduate mothers who felt they stood to lose out from the new scheme. Such fears, Tay said, “would be well founded if the standards in our schools were markedly different from each other. But, in practice, all the schools are paid by the state. The teachers are the ones who make the difference.” But that begged the question as to why the scheme of prioritising the registration of the children of graduate mothers would have been necessary in the first place. Some of his other explanations in defence of the policy were even less unlikely to have quelled offended graduate mothers either, whom the scheme was supposed to aid. “The privilege given under the scheme to graduate mothers is not handed on a silver platter,” Tay explained. “Graduate mothers have to bring up three or more children. They have to work for it.”²⁷

A legal debate as to whether the scheme was unconstitutional also ensued, since the Singapore Constitution forbids the discrimination of children for school admission on the grounds of “descent,” which could be taken to mean what their mother’s education status is.²⁸ When Ong Teng Cheong, then the Minister Without Portfolio, replied that the scheme was not in violation of the Constitution since it did not deprive any child of the right to education, Jeyaretnam asked the government to get a court ruling on the issue, since “the question whether it is discriminatory or not is one of law.”²⁹

Jeyaretnam tackled the issue during the Committee of Supply debates in Parliament in March 1984, during which even a number of PAP MPs also criticised the graduate mothers scheme. He called the scheme “abhorrent” and “fascist,” and cited a litany of opinions gathered from international experts in child psychology and education who either questioned the scientific basis of the scheme or decried the eugenics as being morally wrong.

He reminded Parliament that the “lop-sided procreation pattern” that had emerged, to use Lee Kuan Yew’s own phrase, was after all the result of the government’s family planning policy during the 1970s—namely, the “Stop at Two” campaign that came with a policy of imposing disincentives for couples who had more than two children in the form of childbirth fees, income tax measures, maternity leave and the prioritisation of public housing allocation. “So may I appeal to the Ministry not to play at being God but to accept the limitations that are imposed on mortals,” Jeyaretnam said, “and to make sure that the means that we adopt and use are valid in themselves.”

In response, Tay Eng Soon, the Minister of State for Education, said of Jeyaretnam that “I do not think he has understood what the basic concerns and issues are in this policy.” He chided Jeyaretnam for sending his own children to the best international schools and thus not having to face the issues in Singapore schools that the government would have to address through unpopular policies.

Jeyaretnam insisted on taking a division vote on his motion, even though it would have been a foregone conclusion which way the motion

would have gone because of the numerical superiority of the PAP MPs. That was because, as he told the Speaker, he wanted to see how many of the PAP MPs who had spoken against the graduate mothers scheme would “stand up to be counted.” His motion was defeated by all the 43 PAP MPs present in the chamber during that debate, against his lone vote.³⁰

But Jeyaretnam’s contribution to the debate on the graduate mothers scheme did not end there. During that same parliamentary debate, Jeyaretnam implored the government to suspend the policy until voters have had a say on it. While Tay upheld his government’s approach of tackling policy challenges head-on, he nevertheless said, “The public will vote on the performance of this Government and the Party as a whole at the next elections.”

Indeed, at the general election later that year, the PAP’s share of the popular vote dipped to a level sufficient to concern Lee Kuan Yew. Jeyaretnam’s vote share in Anson increased, despite facing former Chief Executive of the Trade Development Board Ng Pock Too, an arguably stronger and more experienced opponent from the PAP than his opponent in the 1981 by-election.

GENERAL ELECTION 1984		
ANSON	VOTES	%
J. B. Jeyaretnam (WP)	9,909	56.81
Ng Pock Too (PAP)	7,533	43.19

In March 1985, Tony Tan, the Minister for Education, announced in Parliament that he would recommend the Cabinet to scrap the graduate mothers scheme, given the anxiety and resentment it had caused both graduates and non-graduates alike. Tan also admitted that he personally thought the scheme would not produce the desired results. MPs, both PAP and opposition, applauded.³¹

The furore over CPF withdrawal age

If the graduate mothers scheme galvanised the resistance of graduate and

non-graduate women towards government policy, the Howe report raised the ire of an even larger segment of the population.

In March 1984, Howe Yoon Chong, the Minister for Health, launched the Report of the Committee on the Problems of the Aged, based on the meetings he had chaired for two years. While the committee addressed a range of issues concerning elderly Singaporeans in their report, including a recommendation to “legislate filial piety” in which parents would be empowered to extract maintenance payments from a child, it was the recommendation to raise the CPF withdrawal age that struck a raw nerve.³² Because of the government’s policy of encouraging people to work beyond the age of 55, the report recommended that the age for the withdrawal of CPF savings increase from 55 to 60, and eventually to 65. The report said that allowing people to take out the entirety of their CPF savings before their retirement would give them an “illusion of financial security.” Only if the people’s CPF savings were properly invested or protected would it be sufficient for retirees to maintain reasonable standards of living “with dignity and self-respect.”³³

Most Singaporeans thought otherwise—they were incensed that their CPF savings would potentially be withheld from them until they were older. Jeyaretnam branded Howe’s recommendations as a “breach of the trust placed by the contributors with the government.” He said CPF contributors were assured under the law that they could withdraw their savings when they reached the age of 55. “Now they are told they may have to wait another five years, or perhaps even 10 years. Not without justification they will feel they have been cheated.”

He was against the raising of the retirement age too. “It is wrong and cruel to compel someone to continue working after the age of 55, especially in the case of manual labourers and uniformed services through withholding his hard-earned savings,” he said. “It is one thing encouraging people to work after they are 55. It is another thing compelling them without any regard to the toll on their health.”³⁴

In Parliament, some PAP backbenchers even shared Jeyaretnam’s call that the government would be taking away what was rightfully theirs. The



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