I It's a testament to the strength of the PAP that on its night of victory, one should think of the beaten opposition.

In a way, it was always about the opposition.

There was never a question of PAP not being returned to power. The question Singaporeans ask is: Opposition how?

The answer was resounding last night. The current opposition MPs — Mr Low Thia Khiang and Mr Chiam See Tong — improved on their margins.

SDA's Steve Chia lost, along with the other opposition candidates who together put up the biggest showing since the 1997 polls.

All in, however, this was the best opposition showing, in terms of vote share, since the 1997 polls.

The final tally this time: 82 seats to the PAP, one to the Workers' Party, one to the Singapore Democratic Alliance — the same as before.

The bigger story, however, lies in the overall percentage of votes. PAP got 66.6 per cent, a drop from 75.3 per cent in 2001 (an extraordinary year dogged by terrorism and recession).

**Surprised or Not?**

How did it all turn out this way? Let's retrace the opposition's steps.

Would they concede early defeat through a "by-election strategy" by fielding few candidates? Surprise, surprise, they didn't.

Would they come up with good candidates? Surprise, they did.

Would they put up a good show while campaigning? No surprise, they did.

Crowds packed their rallies.

Would such interest lead to more electoral wins? No surprise, it did not. Even the bookies predicted the result way ahead.

Did the opposition triumph in other ways? Surprisingly, they did. Here's how:

**Share of Votes Up**

Though opposition candidates lost island-wide in all contested wards but Hougang and Potong Pasir, their support levels have risen all round.

WP's indomitable chief Mr Low actually increased his winning margin from 55 per cent in 2001 to 62.7 per cent in this time, his best ever in his 15-year parliamentary career. This comes close to the PAP's own threshold of 66 per cent.

Hougang roared when the WP prevailed despite the heavy firepower laid on by the PAP.

Even a $100 million upgrading carrot and Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong's heavyweight presence on the campaign trail failed to sway the majority of Hougang's faithful.

They remained true to a politically-savvy warhorse, whose Teochew charm and sensible, down-to-earth ways endeared himself to ordinary people.

Mr Low revitalised a weakened party (fielding just two candidates in the last election) by attracting yuppies to the WP fold. Examples include Mr Perry Tong, 35, a political science graduate who was among the top 10 per cent of his cohort from the University of California in Berkeley.

The newbie lost at East Coast against the heavyweight PAP team that included Prof S Jayakumar, Mr Raymond Lim, Mr Abdullah Tarmugi and a potential office-holder, Mr Lee Yi Shyan.

Significantly, WP's Perry Tong and two other 30-somethings were able to gain 36.1 per cent of the vote.

Even the young WP "suicide squad" which stuck their necks out to challenge Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in Ang Mo Kio GRC secured 33.9 per cent of the vote — comfortable enough to get their election deposits back.

The 66.1 per cent won by PM Lee's team in Ang Mo Kio GRC was around the same level as the PAP's national vote share of 66.6 per cent.

Singapore Management University's Assistant Professor Eugene Tan said: "WP has employed a calm and confident strategy. They are not prepared to let their actions or agenda be dictated by others, which shows that they are confident enough to stand their ground."

Other observers think the Workers' Party benefited from sympathy votes resulting from the PAP's heavy-handed treatment of the Gomer saga.

**Aljunied Battle**

As widely expected, this year's hottest battle in Aljunied GRC also went right down to the wire — just like it did at Cheng San GRC in 1997 and Eunos GRC in 1991 and 1988.

As it turned out, Foreign Minister George Yeo and his team edged out WP chairman Sylvia Lim and her team with just over 56 per cent of the vote.

Sad though the defeat is for Ms Lim, it remains to be seen if she'll accept the Non-constituency MP seat offered to the best loser.

"We have to think about it. It'll come..."
The anguish of the vanquished: For PAP's Eric Low (right), Sitoh Yih Pin (above) and the SDA's Steve Chia (below), it was their second defeat in the same single seat in successive elections for all three — Mr Low in Hougang; Mr Sitoh in Potong Pasir and Mr Chia in Chua Chu Kang. Have we seen the last of them? Will they rise above the tears to fight again?

from the Aljunied team," she told reporters last night.

"As a party, we’re going to discuss it."

Under existing rules, Parliament can invite up to three NCMPs to the House, minus the total number of elected opposition MPs. With both Mr Low and Mr Chiam due back in Parliament, there'll be one NCMP slot to be filled.

Less surprising was the Singapore's Democratic Party's near-demise, as it lost badly in both Sembawang GRC and Bukit Panjang, polling just 23.3 and 22.8 per cent respectively.

In fact, the PAP's victories in those two constituencies were its highest ever.

"I think too much of the spotlight was on Chee Soon Juan, who wasn't a candidate at all. That took a lot of the attention away from the SDP candidates," said lawyer and former Nominated MP Chandra Mohan.

All in, the PAP's overall vote share was 66.6 percent — a dip from the 75.3 per cent it received at the 2001 polls.

But as political watchers have rightfully pointed out, the 2001 figure — coming off the 9/11 terror attacks and shadow of recession — was an aberration.

A fairer comparison perhaps is with the 1997 and 1991 polls, when the PAP received 65 per cent and 61 per cent respectively.

So overall, it's fair to say, this was a somewhat predictable result for the opposition underdogs.

Said former Nominated MP Zulkifli Baharudin: "They have done enough to show the progress of the opposition, and have shown the voters that they are serious, credible and have a future."

"Remember that Sitoh Yih Pin and Eric Low are also considered 'opposition candidates' in Potong Pasir and Hougang. But they remained visible even after they lost in the last election and continued working the ground. The opposition should also do the same and not fizzle out after the election."

PAP leaders had called this an historic watershed election because it was Mr Lee Hsien Loong's first polls as Prime Minister.

But it looks like 2006 might also shape up to be a watershed year for the Opposition — with a resurgent and more politically-savvy leadership and a promising slate of new faces it can tap for the election in 2011.

The PAP can take pleasure in winning so many seats in Parliament but it is also aware that this is the precursor of a bigger battle to come in 2011.

For Mr Low, Mr Chiam and their opposition colleagues, on the other hand, it’s back to the drawing board as they try to build on their better-than-expected performance. A performance that captured the crowds at their rallies and pushed PAP's counter-strategists to the limit.