WHEN Mr Eric Tan began planning for the 50th anniversary of the Workers' Party early this year, he was hunting with ideas.

A "Youth Parliament" for students to debate a cycling even along East Coast Park; a major share of the budget during the commemorative dinner.

But the debate was canned because schools and parents were hesitant to be part of an opposition party's event; cycling was shadowed because the authorities refused to give the opposition the ride to serenade the party's leader, Low Tho Ching; and a stimulus package was rejected because of a "party political" conflict, as some MPs were in the PR list.

The only event left is a dinner tonight at the Fortune Restaurant in Telok Ayoh, with just a simple slideshow as entertainment.

Finally adds in, says the party treasurer and the surprise chairman, the party was a no-go because it could be deemed a "party political" event among the opposition parties, carrying an average of 34.6 per cent of the votes in the worst contested.

It also made a brave, albeit suicidal, attempt at gunning for Prime Minister Lee Hsien Long in the GRCs and get up a PAP's second on the island.

As it closes a milestone tonight, the question before members' minds must be: Is the party ready to break from its past?

The quiet Hammer?

WHILE it is surprising to see anti-establishment positions on the political forums and blogs on Singapore, it is a tad odd when the criticism is directed at an establishment so quiet.

After PM Lee announced the Central Select Committee's report on his National Day Rally speech in August, Internet postings wondered why the WP, known by its party logo, the Hammer, was so quiet.

"Does it agree or disagree with the PAP?" raised one, days after the Rally, "or is it just saying that it should be proactive and always take the initiative to counter the Government instead of being Around witting for things to happen."

"Just look around at the spontaneous outpouring of views from forums. If the WP cannot perform even up to the standard of those anonymous netizens, how can it ever hope to present itself as a viable alternative?"

It was, to be an establishment re-

But it points towards a gradually changing electorate and society, which demands more from politicians.

As former British prime minister Tony Blair said in June: "When we took an issue a day. In the last term, there was a serious discussion. We did not want to just jump in tomorrow."

"The WP needs to have a greater presence. It is about having the party relevant in between elections."

GOING LOW'S WAY?

The party's activities this year suggest the Low's Way remains very much in vogue.

Only one forum (on Penal Code changes) was held and only two public statements - on Mountbatten and a Labour Day message - were issued.

Locators of its weekly public outreach programmes to sell its Hammer newsletters have been removed from the party website. Party leaders appeared before Parliament, which had been a regular feature, to answer questions on "security and tactical" issues.

"The media is not reporting our activities on the ground and we do not want the media to report to short, three last-minister General Elections," said the netizens, akin to a quiet note. This is in a year when the Government announced three controversial policies - an increase in goods and services tax, a hike in ministerial pay and the repeal of CPF rules.

Besides parliamentary speeches by Ms Low and party chairman Sylvia Lim, as a Non-Constituency MP, not much has emanated from its Syed Alwi Road headquarters.

Mr Lim tells Insight that it is not a de-

The party needs to have a greater presence in between elections."

By falling off Singaporeans' mental maps and disappearing from conversations, it is hard to see how the party can continue to recruit and retain talent - something its members are critical in the face of an opposition party that is starting to emerge.

Although hundreds thronged its open houses after the elections, the flow has now trickled to a few a week and there are only about two dozen members vol-

While the PAP's main in Hoogang, Mr Eric Low, observes new faces among his opponents' volunteers, few of the WP's grassroot recruits have been seen.

"As the party work.

The WP Youth wing president Perry Tong also agrees with the strategy, citing proof of its strength in the party's vote share last year.

Law Lecturer Eugene Tan of the Singapore Management University

"The party's activities this year suggest the Low's Way remains very much in vogue."

"When I bought the party's newsletter, it was as if this was tailored for the experiences and views of your leader Low Tho Ching."

The Singapore Management University

Sooner or later, the party needs to have a greater presence in between elections."

The Workers' Party celebrates its 50th anniversary tonight. Peh Shing Huei surveys the opposition party's fortunes as it gears its golden year, including whether it will enlarge its presence beyond Hougang to win more seats or even a GRC

The quiet Hammer?

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"Where the Government unannounced three controversial policies - an increase in goods and services tax, a hike in ministerial pay and the repeal of CPF rules.
How to win more seats, maybe even a GRC?

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5B

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Workers of the WP has done a good job with its chosen a more "laid-back stance" the interactivity of the Internet community events similar to theulary. WP to offer radical alternatives that's what the Administrative Institute of Policy Studies specialising inor research fellow with the Insti-

Another space to exploit is the is still very much modelence

There remain murmuringsin constituencies where the WP is

This will not work, however, in constituencies where the WP is trying to make inroads and trying to reach out and win over the 'un-converted'. Doing ground work in an area can be enhanced if there is some level of visibility."

A way forward is to set the agenda and not just react to the PAP, he adds.

Dr Terence Chong of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies agrees: "Singaporeans do not look to the WP to fine-tune PAP policies, that's what the Administrative Service is for. They look to the WP to offer radical alternatives and to expand their political vocabulary."

Mr Tan cites the Hongkong constituency as a possible test bed for different ideas, ranging from operation of the town council to the party's engagement with residents. This far, the Hongkong experience -- as is the case with the other opposition ward in Potong Pasir -- is still not much modelled after the PAP's, with weekly Meet-The-People sessions and community events similar to the PAP's, albeit on a much smaller scale.

'Laid-back stance'

Another space to exploit is the Internet. Mr Tan Tarn How, a senior fellow with the Institute of Policy Studies specialising in the Internet, observes that the WP has done a good job with its website, using four languages and conservative and overly cautious among the party ranks of impa-

But whatever the party does, its fortunes in the next 50 years remain dependent to a considerable extent on the PAP, says Associate Professor Hassim Muthal of the National University of Singapore, who specialises in Singapore's politics, the only book on opposition parties.

Therein lies the quandary for the WP going forward. Its rise hinges in no small measure on missteps by the PAP that may or may not happen and with no timetable as reference. But between surrendering passively to the PAP's own performance and having unrealistic expectations of being the alternative party in a two-party system, there appears to be a lot more the WP can do.

The quandary

FOR now, most of the younger members want to give Mr Low their full support. But if they do not see results at the next General Election, either in the capture of another seat or the biggest prize yet, a GRC, impatience may grow and more pressure will mount on him to deliver. As a member tells Insight, the bottom line is clear: "The young ones have been sacrificing their time and they want to be MPs."

But insiders believe that it is highly unlikely, and that it is merely by a carrot that Mr Low dangles to sustain his younger members' passion, as they jockey to be picked as part of the dream team. He dismisses such claims, telling Insight: "Well, I think the passion has to be their own. And they must have the political passion to serve. They can't depend on whether I would pick them on and do that. That is hypothetical."

He adds: "If he would be like Mr Chiam See Tong and stay in Hougang like how the latter remained in Potong Pasir, Mr Low de-

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