WP chief's dilemma: Win big - or lose it all?

BY KOK KIAN BENG

The most closely watched politician on Nomination Day tomorrow is likely to be Workers' Party (WP) chief Low Thia Khiang. Will he defend his single-seat ward of Hougang – or leave this safe haven to lead the WP's charge to capture a GRC? And if he goes to a GRC, which one will it be?

Mr Low has been asked these questions repeatedly since the release of the Electoral Boundaries Report in February. Beyond saying he is mulling over his options, the Hougang incumbent is keeping mum.

The most he would reveal in a recent interview is that he is facing the toughest decision of his life, and that he would explain himself on Nomination Day.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has also weighed in, telling The Straits Times last week that he believes the opposition veteran has already made up his mind.

Asked if it matters to the People's Action Party (PAP) where Mr Low contests, PM Lee said: "Well, where he goes, we will fight harder."

The PAP's counter-attack plan is probably a key reason for Mr Low's reticence. PM Lee's comments lend credence to talk that the PAP might re-deploy ministers to whichever GRC Mr Low guns for. the 2006 polls.

Sources say the top choices considered are the newly created four-member Ang Mo Kio-GRC and the five-member Aljunied GRC, where an "A" team led by WP chairman Sylvia Lim received 43.9 per cent of valid votes in 2006.

Political observer and law lecturer at the Singapore Management University (SMU) Eugene Tan expects Mr Low to contest a GRC, saying the latter could recognise that it is time to take a leap of faith, having served as Hougang MP for 20 years.

"Given that he has stressed that a GRC win was crucial if the opposition hoped to grow and renew its leadership, he has to put his money where his mouth is," says Assistant Professor Tan.

"It's a big gamble. If the WP wins, the WP wins. If WP loses in the GRC where Mr Low contests, it's a significant loss, but staying in Hougang is not going to help the WP get anywhere."

Political commentator Alex Au says he sees several factors that make the coming polls the tight time for Mr Low to make a bid for a GRC.

Mr Low's age is one such factor. If the MP, who turns 55 in September, goes for a GRC this time and fails, he can still try at the next two elections before he is deemed too old to lead his charge.

Mr Au says Potong Pasir MP Chiam See Tong's bid to contest the Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC at age 75 is instructive for Mr Low. The WP chief himself confessed recently that he was not sure if he would stay in politics as long as Mr Chiam has.

Mr Au also believes that if Mr Low leaves Hougang, the WP would still be able to retain the ward, riding on the record 62.7 per cent of valid votes that the WP chief garnered at the 2006 polls.

What the WP needs is to field a known face whom the Hougang voters can trust, adds Mr Au. He cites possible successors in organising secretary Yaw Siin Leong, 35, and WP Youth Wing chief Koh Choong Yong, 37.

But Mr Tan from SMU says there is no guarantee that a WP successor appointed by Mr Low would win in Hougang because some residents there may have voted for the WP chief, not the party.

Third, the WP has several strong candidates that could partner Mr Low and improve the party's chances of a GRC win. One such candidate is China-based corporate lawyer Chen Show Mao, 50, who has degrees from top universities Harvard, Oxford and Stanford.

Another factor is the state of the electoral battleground this time, with the return of smaller GRCs – like Moulmein-Kallang – which are perceived to be easier terrain than five- or six-member GRCs for the opposition.

The likelihood of a contest in almost all 87 seats also means the PAP may have less flexibility in re-deploying ministers to defend a WP team led by Mr Low.

Lastly, the possibility of a worst-case scenario of both opposition seats of the last Parliament being lost by the GRC gambits of Mr Low and Mr Chiam might be just the nudge people need to vote for them, say observers.

Mr Au does not rule out a decision by the WP chief to stay put in Hougang, as losing in a GRC means a complete exit from Parliament for Mr Low and, with it, his position as de facto head of the opposition.

Mr Low has already said he will not take the Non-Constituency MP post should be become one of the best-losing candidates.

Without a platform to make an impact on national issues, it would prove a setback to the WP's efforts since 2006 to raise its profile and replenish its ranks.

In 1991, Mr Low turned the ruling party's election slogan "The Next Lap" on its head when he declared his maiden victory thus: "This is the beginning of the next lap."

Two decades later, is he ready to run the bigger race? Ultimately, much depends not on his political fitness, but how much of a risk-taker Mr Low is.