

Watershed election, thanks to waterworks

BY LEONARD LIM

NOW there is another reason to call this election a watershed one for Singapore.

From ministers to opposition candidates – and even a candidate’s wife – at least nine players in the GE have shed tears over the past few weeks.

Local politics, previously “a-emotional and bland”, has taken on a different slant in the run-up to Polling Day today, noted Singapore Management University (SMU) law academic Eugene Tan.

It started with Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office Lim Boon Heng, who broke down during a press conference a month ago when recalling his struggle

with the decision to allow casinos here.

That opened the floodgates. Next, labour chief Lim Swee Say sobbed at a farewell dinner in his Buona Vista constituency, as did Workers’ Party (WP) secretary-general Low Thia Khiang when recounting his wife’s unwavering support in an interview.

Then, WP candidate Watson Chong, Singapore Democratic Alliance secretary-general Desmond Lim and wife Jolene Goh, the National Solidarity Party’s Gilbert Goh and Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan turned on the waterworks for various reasons.

NSP’s Nicole Seah and PAP’s Lim Hwee Hua were the latest criers. Both dis-

solved into tears during their respective rally speeches on Thursday.

Observers note that for all their tough talk, the tears indicate that politicians are human after all, and do have a softer side that is rarely seen in public.

“Even (Minister Mentor) Lee Kuan Yew cried at the most significant point in his life,” noted former Nominated MP Zulkifli Baharudin.

He was referring to the day in 1965 when the country’s founding father broke down on television after Singapore was forced to leave Malaysia.

However, Mr Zulkifli added: “Except in exceptional circumstances, we do expect politicians to be made of sterner

stuff, especially the old hands.”

For newcomers, it is probably a case of being unable to cope with the sudden attention from the media and the public.

“The whole experience can be quite overwhelming. Nothing would have prepared you for this kind of scrutiny,” he said.

According to political risk consultant Azhar Ghani, the short and intense campaign period – packed with media interviews, house visits, strategy meetings and rallies, which give candidates as little as three hours of sleep a night – may be another factor.

But as to whether such emotional displays actually translate into sympathy

votes, most political observers felt voters are objective enough not to be swayed.

Political scientist Derek da Cunha said: “Singaporeans do not tend to engage in sympathy voting, unless of course they feel someone has been unfairly or unjustly treated over a prolonged period of time.”

There are more important criteria voters will base decisions on, such as a candidate’s character, said Mr Azhar.

Whether the torrent of tears has an effect at the ballot box or not remains to be seen today. But this election has definitely marked the emergence of, to quote SMU’s Assistant Professor Tan, the Sensitive New Age Politician.



Mr Lim Boon Heng broke down during a press conference when recalling his struggle to allow casinos here. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN



The opposition showed it could match the PAP in waterworks when WP candidate Watson Chong broke down. ST PHOTO: SAMUEL HE



Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan showed he was only human when he succumbed to tears during a rally. ST PHOTO: TED CHEN



Overnight celebrity Nicole Seah of NSP was one of the latest criers, dissolving into tears during her rally speech. ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOO



Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office Lim Hwee Hua wipes away tears at a PAP rally in Ubi on Thursday. ST PHOTO: DESMOND LIM