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**PEOPLE & POLITICS**

## **Hot issue but he's Mr Cool**

**Once again, the proposal to increase bus and MRT fares has raised temperatures. Mr Ong Kian Min, chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Transport, is keeping cool. But just whose side is he on - the commuters or transport operators? Insight tries to find out.**

**[By Sue-Ann Chia](#)**

MR ONG Kian Min is keeping his fingers crossed that history won't repeat itself.

Ask him if the proposed public transport fare hikes will cause an uproar, like the previous round in 2002, and he replies with an earnest: 'I hope not.'

Mr Ong may be a lawyer, but he is not keen on confrontation.

The MP for Tampines GRC chairs the Government Parliamentary Committee (GPC) for Transport. Questioned about the proposed hikes, he gives polite, cautious answers. Nothing controversial.

No whacking of transport operators for wanting to earn more money, despite achieving record profits this year.

No criticising of commuters for complaining.

Instead, with his characteristic calm and almost lulling tone, he tries to make sense of an issue that tends to elicit emotive reactions.

His measured responses could also be driven by the fact that fare hikes are considered political hot potatoes.

They sparked a national outcry in 2002 - from coffee shops to Parliament.

This time round, Mr Ong hopes to prevent any potential outbursts, by placating both commuters and transport operators.

But whose side is he on?

Carefully neutral, he says: 'The GPC doesn't take sides. It is set up to look at issues independently, not to protect the interests of the commuters or the operators.'

If the fare increase is unreasonable and unjustifiable, he will surely speak out against it, Mr Ong says during the interview at his law office in Raffles Place.

But if the transport operators' financial viability is affected by low fares, he will consider supporting a raise.

What about the often-hurled criticism - even from MPs in Parliament on Monday - about the big profits transport operators earned?

Tanjong Pagar GRC MP Indranee Rajah had made the sardonic observation that while no timing is good timing to raise fares, transport operators seemed to have taken bad timing and elevated it into an art form.

The two companies had, almost immediately after making their record profit announcements, applied to the Public Transport Council (PTC) to raise fares this year.

ComfortDelGro's profits shot up 50 per cent to \$200.6 million from the year before while SMRT's rose 41.8 per cent to \$126.9 million.

Both insist a fare increase is necessary due to higher labour and oil costs.

### **The full picture**

BUT like a patient economics professor, Mr Ong explains that absolute numbers don't tell the full picture.

The profits must be looked at in relation to the size of operations and total assets. Such measures will determine if the profits are excessive.

So are the returns of SMRT and ComfortDelGro excessive?

One reader wrote to The Straits Times in a letter published on Wednesday that both operators continue to pay dividends which are way above returns on long-term government bonds.

And SMRT recently revealed that its Return on Equity and Return on Assets - instead of Return on Total Assets (Rota) - for its financial year ended this March were 24.5 per cent and 8.4 per cent respectively.

These figures are probably the highest among the large-capitalisation companies in the world, even without adjustment for its implied risk-free nature, the reader argued.

But Mr Ong did not want to be drawn into a discussion about whether the operators' Rota is too high.

It is up to the PTC to decide, he says.

But has it decided on a benchmark?

'I'm not sure if PTC is ready to do so this year,' he says, given that it was tasked to consider such figures only in February.

It was the Fare Review Mechanism Committee, led by Mr Ong himself, which had urged the PTC to look at operators' Rota, among other things, when deciding if fares should be adjusted. For now, he advises the PTC to look at industries with similar kinds of assets and risks.

But should transport operators expect to make huge profits, given that they provide a public service?

Mr Ong's reply is non-committal: 'While I accept they do have to make some profits to continue to be viable and to continue to replace their vehicles and all that, they should also not make too much profits.'

'If they do, something has to be adjusted.'

He points out other factors to consider: long-term viability of the operators and their safety levels.

'We don't want the operators to cut costs and run it so cheaply that safety is compromised.'

### **A vocal MP**

DESPITE his middle-of-the-road answers on this issue, Mr Ong has been more vocal on other matters.

He lobbied hard for private bus operators to provide more feeder services during the 2002 Budget debates.

Since he became chairman of the GPC for Transport last October, one of his key contributions was to chair a committee that came up with a more responsive formula for fare revisions.

There is a consensus among his GPC members, that they should zoom in on public transport issues as these affect most people.

One of the pressing problems he intends to tackle is the rising accident rates involving taxi drivers.

'The Government's solution to this is to penalise the taxi operators. But I think it should go further than that, to the drivers themselves.'

For example, the cabbies' mishaps could be due to fatigue, rather than reckless driving.

'As taxi fares have not increased for many years, drivers have to work longer hours to earn the same amount of money,' he says.

With deregulation, taxi operators are free to set their own fares to compete for passengers, and he has received feedback that drivers' earnings have dipped.

On their part, passengers still have the familiar grouses about not being able to flag down a cab at certain times and complaints about drivers who don't know the way.

What is needed is a conclusive report on these myriad issues. He may ask the Transport Ministry to consider doing one.

Road safety for cyclists is another concern.

'Our roads are not safe for cyclists. They are not given proper regard by other road users,' he says.

While he wants to raise these issues, he's no 'rabble rouser', he says, preferring to keep a low political profile.

Mr Ong, 45, was the recipient of the prestigious President's and Singapore Police Force scholarships to study science at Imperial College, London.

After serving 4 1/2 years of an eight-year bond, he decided to switch careers. He had started studying law as an external student when he was in the police force. He left the force and went on to complete his law degree in London.

In 1989, aged 29, he started again at the bottom rung in the legal profession, earning a meagre \$500 a month as a pupil in a law firm.

But he built up his career quickly, and captured the attention of the People's Action Party. He was invited to his first PAP recruitment 'tea session', in 1991.

After several rounds of interviews and a few years of grassroots experience, he was fielded as a PAP candidate in the 1997 elections.

He was 37 then, a fresh-faced father of five children - four daughters and one son.

Eight years later, he says the most important lesson in his political career is not to be complacent.

He is among a small group of younger MPs who have experienced electoral contests in two elections. Many young MPs were in constituencies that enjoyed walkovers.

He says: 'People don't vote for a politician for what good things he has done in the past.

'People will support the man for what he can do for them going forward.'