

Source. Messages. Scandal

“MY FRIEND got a super scandal about a politician having an affair. Got proof. You interested?”

This intriguing text message sent to The New Paper by a contact at 10.48am on Saturday was the first hint of what unfolded yesterday.

TNP immediately tried to find out more about what seemed like an explosive story.

For the next hour, there was silence. Then a couple more messages arrived five minutes before noon from a source close to the woman linked to the scandal.

At noon, four e-mails with the header “Michael Palmer” were sent to TNP. Attached to three of them were screengrabs of SMS and e-mail exchanges allegedly between the politician and the woman.

Michael Palmer. Speaker of Parliament since last year. Young, dashing politician. This was a big story indeed.

The messages, which seemed to have been sent to the woman’s smartphone, suggested an intimate relationship between the two, which included regular Monday meetings.

One message reads: “Hello darling... I love you loads. More than I sometimes show... Sorry. Love love.”

Another message says: “But you can’t judge our relationship by just what happens on Monday.”

One e-mail shows a forwarded message: “Your booking at Fairmont Singapore.”

The last e-mail sent by the source contained a picture of a Dior handbag that Mr Palmer purportedly gave the woman.

Shortly after, the informant said in an SMS that the

issue needed to be escalated.

He declined to speak to TNP and would only communicate through SMS.

“You recall Yaw Shin Leong? We need good ministers,” he wrote.

Mr Yaw, a former member of the Workers’ Party, was the MP for Hougang before news of his alleged extramarital affairs caused his sacking earlier this year.

As TNP was trying to verify the information given by the source, somewhere else in Singapore that same day, Mr Palmer was coming clean to the People’s Action Party (PAP).

He met Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean and said that “he would resign his positions”, the media was told in a press conference chaired by the DPM yesterday.

When Mr Palmer apologised “for what he had done”, Mr Teo told him to look after his family and to do what he could “to make up for the hurt he had caused them”.

Married

Mr Palmer, 44, has been married for 15 years to Diane, 41, a former lawyer. They have a 10-year-old son.

He said he was having a relationship with a woman, a People’s Association (PA) staff member working in the Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC.

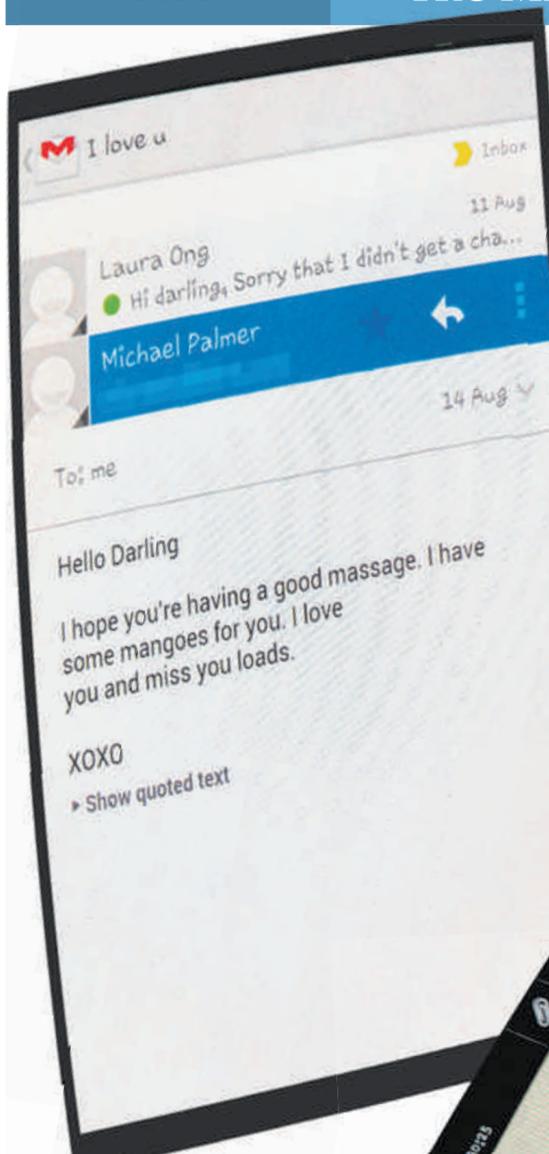
The source told TNP they had been in a relationship for more than a year.

The two did not work directly together. DPM Teo, who has worked closely with Mr Palmer for more than six years, assured him that arrangements would be made so the residents in his constituency would be looked after.

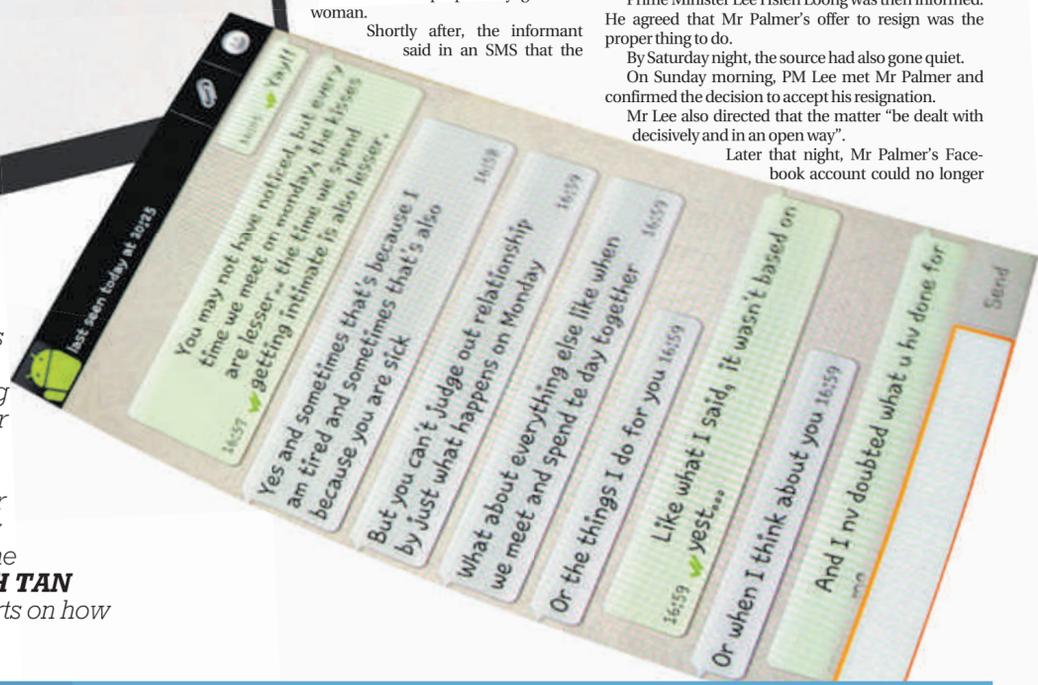
Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was then informed. He agreed that Mr Palmer’s offer to resign was the proper thing to do.

By Saturday night, the source had also gone quiet. On Sunday morning, PM Lee met Mr Palmer and confirmed the decision to accept his resignation. Mr Lee also directed that the matter “be dealt with decisively and in an open way”.

Later that night, Mr Palmer’s Facebook account could no longer



In a shock move yesterday, Speaker of the House Michael Palmer resigned as Member of Parliament for Punggol East after revealing he had an extramarital affair with a woman employee from the People’s Association working in Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC. The New Paper first caught wind of the affair last Saturday. **JUDITH TAN** (judith@sph.com.sg) reports on how the scandal unfolded



Mr Michael Palmer
TNP PICTURE: JONATHAN CHOO

WHO IS MICHAEL PALMER?

MICHAEL Palmer, 44, was elected a Member of Parliament (MP) for the Pasir Ris-Punggol Group Representation Constituency in the 2006 General Election (GE).

He served as the chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Defence and Foreign Affairs from 2008 to 2011, and as the chairman of the Home Affairs and Law committee in 2011.

At last year’s GE, Mr Palmer was elected as MP for Punggol East, a Single Member Constituency, after defeating candidates from the Workers’ Party and the Singapore Democratic Alliance.

He was nominated by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong as Speaker of Parliament, and was elected to the role by the House on Oct 10 last year, making him Singapore’s eighth Speaker.

A lawyer by training, Mr Palmer is also a partner at law firm Harry Elias.

be accessed. At the PAP, the next two days were spent making arrangements to ensure that the residents of Punggol East would be taken care of.

Then yesterday, things came to a head.

First, Mr Palmer’s personal Facebook account was deleted in the morning. Then his Facebook page and Twitter accounts also disappeared.

At 9.33am, the PAP invited the media to a press conference by DPM Teo at 1.15pm.

Facing a roomful of reporters and cameras, a visibly tired and grave Mr Palmer, accompanied by a solemn DPM Teo, announced his resignation.

Reading from a written statement, he told the press he had resigned “to avoid further embarrassment to the PAP and to Parliament”.

He declined to take personal questions on his affair and how it had affected his family.

In his letter to the PM, also dated yesterday, he tendered his resignation as MP and as a PAP member with immediate effect.

He said he took full responsibility for his “grave



Madam Laura Ong

“Hello darling... I love you loads too. More than I sometimes show... Sorry. Love love.”
— One of the messages

The woman in the scandal

REPORT: SHAFFIQ ALKHATIB and ELIZABETH LAW
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SHOCK and surprise.

That was the reaction of someone who knew Madam Laura Ong Hui Hoon well. Madam Ong, 33, is the woman involved with former Speaker of the House Michael Palmer.

“How could it be, she’s such a soft-spoken person,” said the woman who declined to be named.

She described Madam Ong as a “filial person who always cared for her mother”.

Words like “soft-spoken” and “kept to herself” were also used when she spoke about Madam Ong.

Madam Ong was the former constituency director with the People’s Association (PA) in Pasir Ris West Constituency Office.

Records from the Registry of Marriages showed that she got married in March 2006. The New Paper understands that she met her husband at a rollerblading school he runs.

Separated

However, the couple separated about two years after marriage.

TNP also understands that while Madam Ong no longer lives with her husband, she remains on cordial terms with his family.

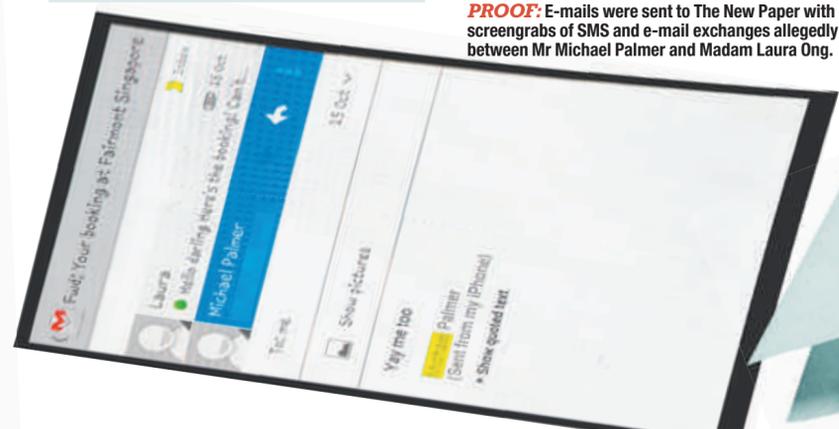
Checks showed that Madam Ong’s 32-year-old husband is a director and shareholder of five different companies.

He is also owns a company that deals with souvenirs.

The PA confirmed that Madam Ong resigned from her position on Dec 10, citing “family commitments”.

“The People’s Association has accepted her resignation,” said the spokesman.

Attempts to contact Madam Ong yesterday on her mobile phone went unanswered.



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PROOF: E-mails were sent to The New Paper with screengrabs of SMS and e-mail exchanges allegedly between Mr Michael Palmer and Madam Laura Ong.

News

The Michael Palmer Affair

Appeal to respect privacy

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mistake".
 "My conduct was improper and it was a serious error of judgment," he wrote.
 PM Lee accepted the resignation "with great sadness" yesterday.

He said: "It is necessary that all PAP MPs and advisers to grassroots organisations uphold the highest standards of personal conduct... and that the party be seen to hold its MPs and advisers to these standards."

Mr Palmer also asked for his family to be spared the publicity.

"I humbly request that you be kind enough to respect my family's privacy during this difficult period," he said.

This appeal was repeated by both DPM Teo and PM Lee.

DPM Teo told reporters that those involved "are suffering much hurt from this episode".

"They need time and space for the healing to take place. I hope Singaporeans give them this time and space to do so, and that in time, they will rebuild their lives," he said.

The PA identified the woman as Madam Laura Ong, constituency director of Pasir Ris West Constituency Office, in a press statement last evening.

It said she had tendered her resignation on Monday, citing family commitments.

Last night, Mr Palmer and his wife met grassroots leaders and volunteers of the Punggol East ward.

In a Facebook post, DPM Teo, who was also there with Mr Teo Ser Luck, said Mr Palmer had apologised to the grassroots members.

"There were tears in many eyes as they wished Michael and his family well," he wrote.

Mr Palmer did not respond to TNP's requests yesterday to comment on the SMS and e-mail exchanges.

Coincidentally, an American novelist named Michael Palmer released his new book this week. Its title - Political Suicide.

PAP was 'swift and resolute'

Political observers analyse Mr Palmer's resignation

REPORT: FOO JIE YING
 fjieying@sph.com.sg

WHEN Mr Michael Palmer stepped down as the Speaker of the House of Parliament and Member of Parliament yesterday, comparisons were drawn between him and former Workers' Party (WP) MP Yaw Shin Leong.

Mr Palmer had admitted to an improper relationship with a member of the People's Association in Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC.

This admission sparked an online furore.

Mr Palmer became a frequent search term on the Internet. On Twitter, his name has been used as a hashtag for every tweet related to him.

In February, WP expelled its MP for Hougang, Mr Yaw Shin Leong, after he failed to account for his alleged extramarital affairs.

The New Paper spoke to three political observers, who agreed that the People's Action Party handled Mr Palmer's incident professionally.

When rumours of Mr Yaw's alleged indiscretions surfaced, WP remained silent. It was only weeks later that Mr Yaw was expelled.

In Mr Palmer's case, the PAP held a press conference to announce his resignation four days after he told Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Teo Chee Hean about



INDISCRETION: Mr Michael Palmer, seen here with his wife, Diane, announced his resignation as Speaker of the House and MP yesterday. TNP FILE PICTURE

indiscretion is consistent with its stand on Mr Yaw's alleged affairs.

He said: "The PAP has indicated its zero-tolerance stance and the expectations it has of its MPs.

"I think the approach taken by the PAP suggests that it is no less harsh on its own MPs, notwithstanding its measured criticism."

Mr Goh thinks this scandal will affect PAP's credibility.

"It just shows that no party, even the ruling party, with its mechanism in screening candidates, can be 100 per cent sure of the good character of the candidates," he said.

Mr Goh said the "so-called myth" of the PAP's brand name and its ability to come up with decent candidates has been "destroyed".

Prof Tan said: "Given that the party has always prided itself on its selection process, I think people will now probably scrutinise the candidates more closely than before."

But he was quick to add that while party branding is important, most voters will ultimately vote for the individual candidate, not the party.

Dr Wong, however, felt that Mr Palmer's affair would have minimal or no impact on the PAP.

Citing recent sex scandals, like former Central Narcotics Bureau director Ng Boon Gay's case, he said the people are now used to such things.

"They are just going to accept it. I doubt this scandal will affect them more than issues that will make a difference in their daily lives, like bus fares."

On Mr Palmer's resignation in light of his affair, DPM Teo said at the press conference yesterday that MPs are expected to "uphold their moral standards" and "have a duty to the public".

Mr Goh, however, felt that it may be no longer realistic to expect perfect political candidates.

"Adultery is quite common nowadays. Ultimately, the candidates have to come from the same pool of people that we live with in Singapore," said Mr Goh.

"This is something for people to think about, whether we really want perfection of character."

his affair.

Former National Solidarity Party secretary-general Goh Meng Seng compared Mr Yaw's case to Mr Palmer's.

"The way you handle the problem reflects how you are as a person. I think Mr Yaw's way of handling matters was not very responsible," said Mr Goh, who runs a blog called Singapore Alternatives.

"He apologised and admitted his mistake. That's the way to do it," he said.

cide quickly."

Law professor and political commentator Eugene Tan said the PAP has acted "swiftly and resolutely so one can't really fault it on that score".

Mr Goh was impressed by Mr Palmer's decision to come clean.

"He apologised and admitted his mistake. That's the way to do it," he said.

Mistakes

Political observer Dr Wong Wee Nam said: "Everybody can make mistakes. (The PAP) should have been careful when they accused others of making mistakes."

Prof Tan, who is also a Nominated Member of Parliament, agreed, saying: "Both parties are going to be wary. No one can take a holier-than-thou attitude now. Everyone will be a lot more cautious."

Prof Tan felt that the PAP's stand on Mr Palmer's

WHAT NOW?

Who will replace Mr Michael Palmer at Punggol East constituency?

Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean said he has asked Mr Teo Ser Luck, Minister of State for Trade and Industry and North East District Mayor, to oversee Punggol East constituency, which is a single-seat constituency.

Mr Zainal Sapari will be appointed as the new chairman of Pasir Ris-Punggol Town Council.

Who will replace Mr Palmer as Speaker?

Deputy Speaker Charles Chong, who is the Acting Speaker, will continue in this role.

The Prime Minister will nominate a new Speaker for Parliament's consideration when it next meets.

Will there be a by-election for Punggol East SMC?

In a post on his Facebook page yesterday evening, PM Lee Hsien Loong said the Constitution does not require him to call a by-election within any fixed time frame.

He said: "I will carefully consider whether to call a by-election in Punggol East and, if so, when. I assure Singaporeans that I will make my decision based on what is best for the constituents of Punggol East and the country."

When former Hougang MP Yaw Shin Leong was expelled by the Workers' Party (WP) and vacated his seat in February, Hougang resident Vellama Marie Muthu filed an application with the High Court for a mandatory order for PM Lee to call a by-election within three months or within a "reasonable time" deemed by the court.

She withdrew the application after PM Lee called for a by-election to be held on May 26.

WP's Png Eng Huat won the seat against the People's Action Party's Desmond Choo.

SEX SCANDALS IN 2012

THE Chinese character "se" means colour, but it can also mean lust. On Monday, Lianhe Zaobao's readers voted it as the word of the year, among others such as "change", "reproach" and "home". And they may be spot-on.

In the past year, Singapore has seen a number of high-profile scandals:

Sex-for-contracts

WHO: Former CNB director Ng Boon Gay, 46

WHAT: Ng faces four charges of obtaining oral sex from former IT sales manager Cecilia Sue Siew Nang, 36, to further the interest of her companies between June and December last year.

TRIAL: Ms Sue testified in court in September that Ng had forced her to give him oral sex in a car on four occasions.

The defence maintains they were in a consensual relationship. Ng took the stand last month and denied

doing anything wrong.

The trial has been adjourned and oral submissions are scheduled for next month before the court gives its verdict.

WHO: Former Singapore Civil Defence Force commissioner Peter Benedict Lim Sin Pang.

WHAT: Lim, 52, is accused of engaging in sex with Ms Pang Chor Mui, in her 40s, at a carpark at Stadium Walk on May 2, 2010, while she was the general manager of Nimrod Engineering. Nine other charges have been stood down.

TRIAL: Scheduled for next month.

Sex-for-grades

WHO: National University of Singapore (NUS) law professor Tey Tsun Hang, 41

WHAT: Tey allegedly obtained gifts and sexual favours in

exchange for favouring his student, Miss Darinne Ko Wen Hui, 23, in his assessment of her academic performance between May and July 2010. He is also accused of having sexual intercourse with her on two occasions.

TRIAL: Scheduled for Jan 10.

Underage paid sex

WHO: Fifty-one men allegedly paid to have sex with a 17-year-old prostitute. The men included Howard Shaw Chai Li, grandson of the founder of cinema giant Shaw Organisation, and entrepreneur Ban Yinh Jheow.

WHAT: The 51 men were charged with having commercial sex with the girl between September 2010 and last October, when she was below 18. She is now 19.

TRIALS: The 11th accused, former Republic of Singapore Navy captain Chan Wei Kiat, 27, was sentenced to 11 weeks' jail in October.

Opposition calls for by-election

WORKERS' PARTY (WP)

In a statement yesterday, the WP noted that Speaker of Parliament Michael Palmer had resigned from the People's Action Party.

It said that by virtue of Article 46 of the Constitution, his parliamentary seat of Punggol East Single Member Constituency has become vacant.

For the residents of Punggol East to be properly represented, the WP urged the Prime Minister to call a by-election as soon as possible.

REFORM PARTY (RP)

In a statement yesterday, RP's Secretary-General Kenneth Jeyaretnam urged the PM to call a by-election as soon as possible for Punggol East residents to be represented.

He added that RP is "strongly considering contesting" the seat if and when there is a by-election.

