

'INVALUABLE TO CABINET'

More backbenchers to the fore

Analysts say they can provide on-the-ground perspective on issues, aid in policy-making

AMIR HUSSAIN
amirhussain@mediacorp.com.sg

SINGAPORE – The latest promotion of another two backbenchers to the front bench will add to the growing proportion of junior political office-holders who have had backbench experience.

This would help the Government cope with the growing complexity of

policy-making, said several political analysts and veteran Members of Parliament (MPs).

It was announced yesterday that Jurong GRC MP Desmond Lee and Chua Chu Kang GRC MP Low Yen Ling will become Minister of State (National Development) and Parliamentary Secretary (Social and Family Development), respectively.

Among the other junior political office-holders — those holding the appointments of Senior Ministers of State, Ministers of State, Senior Parliamentary Secretaries and Parliamentary Secretaries — almost half

“There are enough very vocal and capable advocates among the backbenchers to fill the void or to fill the places left behind.”

Mdm Halimah Jacob

came from the back benches, including Ms Indranee Rajah, Mrs Josephine Teo, Dr Maliki Osman, Associate Professor Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim and Mr Sam Tan.

Political observers and MPs that TODAY spoke to noted the value backbenchers can bring to the lower rungs of Cabinet.

Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan said: “The time as a backbencher is invaluable in helping them see how policy issues are perceived on the ground. They add a grassroots dimension as well. The challenge is to maintain that grassroots feel

even after becoming an office-holder.”

National University of Singapore political scientist Bilveer Singh noted that backbenchers “have more ground experience than some ministers” and that the “value of work as MPs is under-rated”.

“You look at Tharman (Shanmugaratnam). Although he is DPM, he is also one of the most respected MPs because he does a lot of work on the ground, he interacts with the ground,” he said.

In fact, veteran MP Inderjit Singh said it was “better” to let MPs “have some feel as backbenchers” before they are appointed to political office, including as ministers. “The overall quality of decision-making will improve,” he said.

Ms Low said her experience as a backbencher allowed her to see “how Government and Parliament worked and debated to improve policies and legislation”.

While those TODAY spoke to noted that the promotion of backbenchers could be seen as a loss, they emphasised that this was part of the political process.

Among two of the most vocal backbenchers who were promoted to become political office-holders in recent years were Dr Amy Khor, who will be promoted to Senior Minister of State from next month, and Madam Halimah Jacob, who was a Minister of State before she was appointed as Speaker of Parliament earlier this year.

Dr Khor said: “You need people on either sides of the bench — you need to have the policy-makers, you also need to have the backbenchers.”

Mdm Halimah reiterated that “there are enough very vocal and capable advocates among the backbenchers to fill the void or to fill the places left behind”.