

CABINET RESHUFFLE: COMMENTARY

Strong, cohesive leadership must emerge from Cabinet rejig

Changes have to throw up PM Lee's successor too. **By Eugene KB Tan**

COMING a mere nine months after the current Cabinet was unveiled, one clear message in Friday's Cabinet reshuffle is that we should not get ahead of ourselves in trying to determine which fourth-generation (4G) leader is poised to step up, now that Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat has stepped aside as the Prime Minister-in-waiting.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong fronted the press conference at the Istana alone, clearly signalling that it is business as usual with the focus squarely on keeping Singaporeans safe amid the prolonged Covid-19 pandemic and managing the economic onslaught.

As he indicated, these changes were among those he had wanted to make after last July's general election, but for Singapore being in the thick of the pandemic.

Even then, a total of 13 ministries having new ministers in two Cabinet reshuffles within a span of nine months is significant. These are by no means "consequential changes".

In fact, these significant moves underscore not only the urgency of leadership renewal and succession, but also the need for certainty and confidence as Singapore transitions to the 4G leadership which will coincide with the post-Covid era.

With the arc of the pandemic still uncertain, the changes that Mr Lee made will give the ministers more exposure, broaden their experience, and sharpen their policy nous. It is also about enabling them to engage new stakeholder groups.

More fundamentally, it is about putting the 4G leadership through the paces of working together cohesively as a team.

Growing imperative

While all eyes were on who would be the new Finance Minister, the choice of Lawrence Wong is probably the most intuitive.

Having him take the helm of the Ministry of Finance (MOF) would allow for a seamless transition at a time when the demands on Singapore's fiscal resources are growing. He has been the Second Minister at MOF since August 2016 and was on the board of the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) prior to that.

There is the growing imperative to ensure inter-generational equity as major infrastructure projects are needed, such as those for water security, climate-change mitigation and new MRT lines.

The Goods and Services Tax hike will likely take place on his watch. There is never a good time for a tax hike but how it is managed and sold to Singaporeans will matter immensely.

With Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing moving to helm the Education Ministry, the appointment of outgoing Health Minister Gan Kim Yong as Mr Chan's replacement at MTI will provide the mark of stability and a familiar face and name.

As the economy increasingly takes centre-stage so long as the pandemic is kept at bay, Mr Gan will bring his technocratic flair and amiable engagement style and continue instilling confidence in our economy.

There will be the concerted effort to have



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small and medium-sized enterprises be the much-needed innovative spark and engine in the economy at a time of growing economic nationalism.

Mr Chan's deployment in education will see him managing the second largest component in Singapore's budgetary expenditure.

He will complete the string of frontrunners who have led the Education Ministry (MOE) since 2011 – first with Mr Heng, followed by Ong Ye Kung, and then Mr Wong (albeit for just nine months). MOE is certainly the ministry to watch.

Mr Chan brings intimate knowledge of how the post-pandemic world would evolve economically.

The education system must not only be able to support the economy, but should endeavour to unleash the full potential of Singapore's most precious resource – her people – beyond examinations.

Mr Ong will leave the Ministry of Transport to lead the Health Ministry, and become the new co-chair for the government's multi-ministry taskforce (MTF) on Covid-19.

Singapore has managed relatively well in the medical response to the pandemic, which may be the first of regular pandemics in this century.

The rollout of the national vaccination programme has achieved steady steam, but there may be the need for regular vaccinations. Ensuring that the healthcare system will not be overwhelmed will thus be crucial.

With an ageing population and a growing re-

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source demands for healthcare needs, Mr Ong's ability to have various stakeholder groups come together for the common cause will stand him in good stead.

It is also important to see how he and Mr Wong will work together as the MTF co-chairs, which will now be a showcase of sorts for the 4G team. A lot is at stake in terms of maintaining and boosting public confidence in the next-generation leadership.

Exceptional times

How they handle the pandemic response can be critical to the ruling party's prospects and game plan in the next general election.

What lies ahead, now that the full suite of personnel changes is put in motion?

It remains very much how Singapore is governed in these challenging times. The policy imperatives are clear and the policy options are often limited for a city-state.

These are exceptional times. Leadership matters. A leadership that can galvanise the people will enable Singapore to emerge stronger.

This Cabinet reshuffle must get Singapore closer to not only throwing up a worthy successor to PM Lee, but also a cohesive and talented leadership.

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