

COMMENTARY

A workmanlike Cabinet reshuffle focusing on immediate priorities

Most of the latest changes are at Minister of State level, which exposes younger leaders to new responsibilities while broadening their portfolios. BY EUGENE K B TAN

It is not surprising that there was no comprehensive reshuffle this time when Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced the latest set of changes to his Cabinet line-up on Monday (Jun 6). The spotlight naturally fell on Finance Minister Lawrence Wong who was promoted to Deputy Prime Minister from Jun 13, while continuing in the finance portfolio.

The expected promotion came less than 2 months after Wong, 49, was chosen by his peers to be the new leader of the People's Action Party (PAP)'s fourth-generation (4G) leadership. This puts him in line to be Singapore's next prime minister should the ruling party win the next general election (GE) that must be held by November 2025.

DPM Heng Swee Keat's surprise decision to step aside last year as the 4G leader precipitated extensive changes in the previous reshuffle in May 2021, which had come less than a year after PM Lee had formed his Cabinet after the July 2020 GE. Then, a total of 7 Ministries saw new heads - Communications and Information, Education, Finance, Health, Manpower, Trade and Industry, and Transport.

On Monday, PM Lee decided to retain all his ministers in their respective portfolios. Most of the latest changes centred on the Minister of State level, which exposes the younger leaders to new responsibilities while broadening their public policy portfolio.

Wong will also be responsible

for the Strategy Group in the Prime Minister's Office, taking over from Heng, in tandem with the move to prepare Wong to eventually succeed PM Lee.

The Strategy Group is a significant concurrent responsibility for the PM-in-waiting. It is tasked with whole-of-government strategic planning and strategic alignment across the Government on key priorities and emerging issues facing Singapore over the medium to long-term. It includes the National Population and Talent Division and the National Climate Change Secretariat.

That there was no retirement of Ministers indicates PM Lee's preference to have a full repertoire of steady hands and deep experience in 3G leaders such as

Senior Ministers Teo Chee Hean and Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen, and Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam. This provides a reassuring ballast in leadership as Singapore navigates the tricky post-pandemic world amid significant geopolitical uncertainties and economic challenges.

The labour movement will welcome another political office holder, after the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) has agreed to PM Lee's request for Senior Minister of State Chee Hong Tat to return to the Government full-time. In his place, Minister of State Desmond Tan will join the NTUC.

This continues the recent practice of junior ministers

spending a stint in the NTUC. This affirms the symbiotic relationship between the PAP and the NTUC and the endeavour to strengthen the tripartite partnership of Government, employers, and workers.

It also enables the Government to have more political leaders working with union leaders and employers to maintain and enhance the strong industrial relations. This is only possible if younger government leaders are familiar with the labour issues and able to build long-term relationships with the key stakeholders.

Even as political renewal is in an advanced stage, the PAP government will want to emphasise change amid continuity, as well

as capitalise on the younger 4G and fifth-generation leaders coming to the fore with their own style of political engagement and mobilisation.

Last year's Cabinet reshuffle generated much speculation on sizing up the Cabinet changes for clues and hints on the 4G leader likely to succeed Lee. In contrast, Monday's reshuffle was relatively low-profile. Overall, it signals the Government's intent to work on the immediate priorities for Singapore, and for there to be as little disruption at the ministerial level as possible.

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