

Confidence in Singapore's future vital to leadership renewal

Time is of the essence, but handing over the reins involves other important considerations on the path forward for the country.



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A recurring salient theme in Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's National Day Rally (NDR) speeches on Aug 20 was that nation-building requires the citizenry to believe that the country's past, especially its founding moments, forms the zeitgeist that charts its future and destiny.

There must also be the citizenry's innate belief of a strong future where the present and future generations confidently continue the shared nation-building enterprise initiated by earlier generations.

The policies unveiled at the NDR to address retirement adequacy, unemployment concerns, and housing affordability and accessibility sought to provide reassurance and imbue that sense of confidence and belief in Singaporeans in the country's future, despite the prevailing global uncertainties.

But confidence hinges on trust in the leadership to have the people's best interests in mind, to know what the deeply held pain points are and co-create creative yet sustainable solutions.

Confidence in the future is also becoming a litmus test for another issue PM Lee touched on at the National Day Rally: the crucial task of leadership renewal. PM Lee stated the succession plans disrupted by the pandemic were "back on track", and the recent controversial issues involving the ruling party's parliamentarians would not delay the timetable for renewal. He also affirmed his confidence in Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong and the fourth generation (4G) team. This public endorsement is crucial.

PM Lee also shared his role in the home stretch of the leadership succession: "More and more, my task is to support the 4G team and their agenda. I want to get them off to the best start possible."



Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has affirmed his confidence in Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong and the 4G team. This public endorsement is crucial, says the writer. ST FILE PHOTO

However, and unsurprisingly, PM Lee did not give a timeline on the handover of leadership to the 4G team. The 4G leaders were stress-tested during the key pandemic years and they are already helming most of the ministries. The next reshuffle likely later in 2023 will see them helming one or two more key ministries.

The signal is that the ball is in the 4G team's court and they should take over the reins of power at a time of their choosing. However, time is of the essence: Just under two years remain in the current term of Parliament.

FROM THE PAST

What would make an appropriate timing for this milestone?

Singapore's first handover of power took place in 1990, on the occasion of the 25th year of independence. In 2025, Singapore celebrates 60 years of independence where elaborate commemorations can be expected to mark another milestone in nation-building.

In 2024, it will also be 20 years since PM Lee assumed the top role, and this provides a timely point to look back at Singapore's progress under his leadership.

This could well be the backdrop to PM Lee stepping down as prime minister before the next election (which must be held latest by November 2025) but continuing as the People's Action Party's (PAP) secretary-general in a move that signals both progress and continuity. This was the case when the leadership transitioned from Mr Lee Kuan Yew to Mr Goh Chok Tong. Mr Goh succeeded Mr Lee as prime minister in

November 1990 and assumed the ruling party's top post in 1992.

As PM Lee has signalled, Singapore has weathered Covid-19 and emerged with the economy in relatively good shape and society more united. This would be similar to the last leadership transition, where PM Lee's taking over from Mr Goh was delayed by the Sars outbreak and subsequent economic distress in early 2003. Recovery from a crisis is a precondition for the handover.

But just as important is whether the incoming leadership can forge an understanding with and show the population it understands its anxieties and has a way forward.

Precedence sheds light on how the PAP's 3G did this. In December 2001 in the wake of the dot.com bust, the Economic Review Committee (ERC) led by then DPM Lee was formally established by Mr Goh to review Singapore's development strategy and formulate a blueprint to restructure the economy, even in the throes of a recession.

The ERC comprised several 3G leaders who were elected in the November 2001 General Election, which was held in the wake of the Sept 11 terrorist attacks in the United States that year. The committee made many specific recommendations to prepare Singapore for the transition to a knowledge-based economy.

Reassurance on the country's path forward was central to leadership renewal then. Fast forward 20 years, and we see the need for the same.

FOR THE FUTURE

A big part of the agenda for the

4G team has been to determine what it will take to continue to build the confidence of citizens in their future and Singapore's.

The need to remake society through the social compact has come to the fore. And the 4G team has undertaken this monumental task through the Forward Singapore (ForwardSG) exercise which was launched in June 2022.

A system that is fair to all and benefits everybody over the long run were key considerations in the ERC's work. This is the case too for ForwardSG. Whether it is economic or social remaking, consensus building and winning the hearts and minds of Singaporeans in an increasingly diverse society is essential to the way forward in revitalising the social compact.

The 4G-led ForwardSG consultation will conclude in a few months' time with a much-anticipated report. Meanwhile, the announcements at the NDR on public housing affordability and accessibility as well as retirement adequacy, which sought to provide reassurance amid anxieties about the future, give us a hint of how the culmination of the ForwardSG exercise might look.

In some ways, the 4G leadership has already put some of its cards on the table and given us a glimpse of where it stands on the key issues Singapore has to address.

When it comes to retirement adequacy, the 4G leaders are prepared to extend more support to ensure that older Singaporeans have enough to tide them through the silver years. At the same time, this support is

calibrated carefully through means tests so that those in the greatest need get the most help. They also seek to incentivise Singaporeans to continue working for longer to keep them mentally alert and financially secure.

When it comes to public housing, they will dismantle the outmoded binary of mature and non-mature estates to ensure that HDB flats remain affordable and are also allocated fairly, with a good social mix.

When it comes to work life in a disrupted world, the 4G leadership recognises that jobs could suddenly become redundant and people affected will need financial support while they focus on reskilling or retraining for new careers.

The vision painted by the emerging leadership is becoming clearer. Policies that have served us well have to be revitalised to ensure they remain relevant and fit for purpose.

How well the 4G leadership stokes the imagination of Singaporeans on the renewed social compact and how much broad-based support they can draw for it will play a key role not only in determining the pace of leadership renewal in this home stretch but also whether they can inspire trust and confidence in the 4G leadership.

As the 4G leaders deliberate on the blueprint for remaking society after the numerous consultations and dialogues and brainstorming, what PM Lee said in a 2003 speech on the remaking of the economy is insightful.

PM Lee said then: "Our future depends on Singaporeans being resilient and self-reliant, yet we must make sure that those who are truly unable to cope get the help they need."

"We will continually need to balance these two objectives, to ensure that we do not have any free riders on our ship, and yet that all of us will reach the destination together."

How the 4G leaders seek to recalibrate the social compact will probably be a game changer for Singapore and the political leadership.

The current leadership, in its remaining two years, will be closely scrutinised. How the 4G team paints a picture of its plans for the future, reinforces the belief of a purposeful and bright future, and secures the buy-in of Singaporeans will be just as closely watched. Confidence in Singapore's future is vital to the pace and success of the ongoing leadership renewal.

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