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New Cabinet will have its work cut out


EUGENE K B TAN

Politics in Singapore is generally marked by incremental change. However, with the watershed General Election of May 7, politics and government in Singapore will not be the same again. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong described the changes to the Cabinet as "epochal".

The last significant change to the Cabinet in 2001 now looks less dramatic and tame in comparison.

In 2001, on the back of a good crop of new MPs elected that year, only seven new MPs — including now newly-appointed Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam — were made office-holders but were not appointed to the Cabinet.

The new Cabinet represents a break from the past and underlines the urgency of the political renewal process at the highest level. It is the largest injection of new blood into the Government after a GE. PM Lee indicated that further changes will be made mid-term.

The changes build on Saturday's joint decision by Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew and Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong to step down from Cabinet. Collectively, they point to transformation of the ruling party in response to the distinct shifts in our political landscape and the imperative to stay in sync with the rapidly-changing domestic and international landscape.

The need to put in place the fourth generation leadership has acquired added urgency and the testing of new blood is evident. Only three Ministers first elected as Members of Parliament in the 1980s remain in the Cabinet: The Prime Minis-

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ter, Trade and Industry Minister Lim Hng Kiang and Law and Foreign Affairs Minister K Shanmugam.

The elections demonstrated that connecting with a younger electorate is a massive challenge. And so the accent on youth is again not surprising. Although PM Lee has described the new line-up as change amid continuity, the trend is clearly on change, underlining the commitment that "it cannot be government as usual", in MM Lee's words.

CHANGE LEADING TO MORE CHANGE?

Of course, Singaporeans will want to see what real changes follow from this Cabinet line-up. Will it signal a fundamentally different style and approach by the Government to policy making and implementation? Or will it be more form than substance?

Cosmetic changes will be met with a strong backlash. Certainly, the changes raise expectations of even more change in the future — which might be perhaps unfair to the new office-holders.

Nonetheless, it does appear that the emphasis is on new approaches, new ideas, freshness and boldness, even in looking at existing policies that have served us well.

This approach would be particularly pertinent and timely for hot-button issues such as housing affordability, the strengthening of our framework of social support and the population/immigration challenge. Sacred cows may well have to be slain.

But overall policy imperatives would not change, what would change is how the consultation will be done, how policy buy-in will be engendered, how policy will be implemented. The nuances will be as important as the substance of policies and style of government.

THROWN INTO THE DEEP END

The incoming Cabinet of 15 ministers is more streamlined and lean — it is about a third smaller than the outgoing one which has 21 ministers. To make up for the departure of nine ministers, including MM Lee and SM Goh, the new Cabinet will see the more established ministers wear two or even three hats. Almost every new office-holder will hold more than one portfolio.

The broad-based changes affect current

ministers as well: Eleven ministries will have new ministers helming them. In two ministries, Education and Community Development, Youth and Sports, the Ministers and Ministers of State are first-time MPs.

The new line-up indicates that the new office holders will be thrown into the deep end.

While not an ideal situation, there is the quiet confidence that they will rise to the challenge and perform well. Given the sweeping changes, and a radically new team, this new Cabinet will have its work cut out and will have to hit the ground running.

Nonetheless, the new office-holders will be supported by a well-run Civil Service.

At this point it is noteworthy to recall Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean's call last week for the Public Service to harness "the collective wisdom and knowledge of the people and stakeholders", so as to "help create a Singapore where citizens can feel engaged and have shared ownership of the challenges and look for solutions together".

In short, the themes of change, engagement and shared ownership are central to the new governance.

The new Cabinet line-up is certainly no populist reaction but the May 7 results for the People's Action Party (PAP) would have contributed to the extent of the changes that ring out the old and ring in the new.

With a more demanding electorate, the PAP Government will have to renew trust with the people. The elections indicate that Singaporeans are desirous of a government that engages them in major national decisions but this engagement process is an iterative process and it will take time before we settle to a new norm.

What is clear is that the Government must adapt to a changing political landscape both in form and in substance. Hard, cold rationality premised on cost-benefit analysis is not enough. Values based on post-material ideals and aspirations will take on greater importance. Ultimately, it is about the Government and the people working together for the common good. ■

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