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Passing the baton: Getting the 4G leadership ready

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EUGENE K B TAN



Although the next General Election (GE) is not due until April 2021, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has signalled that the leadership renewal is proceeding apace by making his third round of changes to his Cabinet since the September 2015 GE.

The latest Cabinet changes last Thursday build on and consolidate earlier ones, but do not amount to a major reshuffle. Over the weekend, PM Lee indicated that he plans "a much bigger change" in 2018. There will be "more ministers, more changes by that time and then more new ministers will be helming their own ministries", he said.

With the appointment of Mrs Josephine Teo and Mr Desmond Lee as Ministers effective on May 1, the fourth-generation (4G) leadership now has a core team that is growing incrementally in number as well as in expertise and experience.

It is being put through its paces with heavier responsibilities, to challenge the team members individually and as a team.

A significant sign of how the 4G leaders are being prepared to take over came from PM Lee in his May Day rally on Monday, when he explained why he is putting the 4G ministers in charge of the Future Economy Council to implement the recommendations of the Committee on the Future Economy.

"It is an opportunity for the younger ministers to work closely together

CORE TEAM GROWING IN NUMBER, EXPERTISE AND EXPERIENCE

Passing the baton: Getting the 4G leadership ready

as a team, strengthen their bonds with employers and unions, and with each other, and show Singaporeans what they can do," said Mr Lee.

There are now seven 4G Ministers who were first elected as Members of Parliament either in 2011 and 2015: Messrs Chan Chun Sing, Heng Swee Keat, Desmond Lee, Ng Chee Meng, Ong Ye Kung, Tan Chuan-Jin and Lawrence Wong.

In addition, the other 4G Ministers elected before 2011 are Mr S Iswaran (1997), Ms Grace Fu, Mr Masagos Zulkifli and Mrs Teo (all in 2006).

It is likely that the new Ministers to be appointed next year will come from the ranks of Senior Ministers of State, of which there are at least eight (including the four latest promotions) who can be identified as being part of the 4G cohort.

The new junior ministers' individual trajectories are not unusual but, as a cohort, it is significant. With their relatively rapid promotions, it should not come as a surprise if they are being groomed to become Ministers in due course.

With the latest changes, there are now slightly more than 20 4G officeholders, from Senior Parliamentary Secretaries to Ministers.

Time is of the essence for Singapore's fourth Prime Minister to be well known to Singaporeans. Going by precedent, PM Lee will probably lead the People's Action Party in the next GE before handing the reins of government to his successor two to three years after the polls.

Given the demands and vagaries of politics and public office, it is advantageous for the 4G leadership to be adequately staffed, and to possess sufficient depth and breadth in their ranks. As it stands, the 4G leadership has a predominantly public sector or military background prior to entering politics.

With more younger Ministers taking charge, we can expect a few of the seniors in the Cabinet to step down in next year's reshuffle. Most have been in the Cabinet for on average close to two decades.

In addition, next year's reshuffle is likely to see most, if not all, of the 4G leadership being reassigned ministerial portfolios, to enable them to cut their teeth and learn the ropes in new areas.

However, gone are the days when certain ministries, such as Defence, Finance, and Trade and Industry, are regarded as mandatory way stations to the premiership.

Instead, given the more complex governance landscape and the persistence of issues such as income and wealth inequalities, the need for the political leadership to be sensitised and knowledgeable in social and grassroots matters is arguably greater than before.

In addition, issues such as population matters, climate change, cyber security and the Smart Nation initiative will require a whole-of-government perspective as well as an interdisciplinary approach to managing challenges, including those over the horizon.

Singapore's 4G Prime Minister and his Cabinet colleagues will not have the long gestation period as Ministers that their older colleagues had. For instance, Mr Goh Chok Tong was

Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) for five years between January 1985 and November 1990.

His successor, PM Lee, was DPM for an extended period of almost 14 years, between November 1990 and August 2004.

In fact, PM Lee had been in politics for 20 years when he became Prime Minister. Will PM Lee appoint a 4G Minister as DPM in the reshuffle next year?

It would probably still be early days then, considering that the 4G team is still being developed and the front-runners to be Prime Minister having no more than seven years as Ministers under their belt.

But the need for PM Lee's successor to have greater visibility is a growing imperative as the handover draws closer.

The latest time such an appointment could take place is just before or after the next GE.

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PM Lee, 65, had said that he would like to step down some time after the next GE, without giving a specific time frame. He had once said in an interview that Singapore should not have a Prime Minister who is 70 years old or older.

Much hype and anticipation surrounds this leadership renewal, as it is still not clear who will succeed PM Lee. That may, however, not be the case where the 4G leaders are concerned, since they work closely with one another. Like their predecessors, the 4G leaders will choose, by consensus, the next Prime Minister from among their number.

In the meantime, the 4G leadership will continue to be rigorously tested and stretched in a variety of portfolios. The challenge for them is to grow in confidence and to gain the trust of the people — as individual Ministers and as a team.

How they come together as a team and stronger than their predecessors is critical, given that the calibre, values, resilience and ethos of our political leadership is a vital prerequisite to Singapore's continued success.

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