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Pushing aggressively for political renewal

BY

[EUGENE K B TAN](#)

September 29, 2015

In one of the most anticipated Cabinet reshuffles that precedes the cusp of a leadership transition, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong did not disappoint and kept to his word to “push aggressively” for political renewal and succession. While change amid continuity is an apt description for the new line-up, there is no doubting that the emphasis is clearly on change.

The operating system driving Mr Lee’s latest Cabinet is urgency and boldness. Unlike the last Cabinet change barely six months ago, which was deliberately limited and targeted, Mr Lee is intent on setting the stage for the fourth-generation (4G) leaders to take over when the next General Election (GE) is due by April 2021.

For now, the Cabinet comprises 3G and 4G leaders. This is not surprising, as the younger leaders are not quite ready to take over the reins of Government. Hence, the 3G leaders are now playing more supportive roles while the 4G leaders are moving up to key appointments.

For instance, Mr Heng Swee Keat and Mr Lawrence Wong will lead the heavyweight ministries of Finance and National Development, respectively. This is in addition to Mr Chan Chun Sing and Mr Tan Chuan-Jin continuing in their existing portfolios in the labour movement and the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF).

Two new faces, Mr Ng Chee Meng and Mr Ong Ye Kung, were also catapulted into Cabinet with a novel arrangement of co-helming the Education Ministry.

If this Cabinet reshuffle is an indicator of things to come, we can expect the next reshuffle in 18 to 24 months to be even more significant, because the current change is more a transitional point than the end point. In some respects, the leadership handover is being accelerated, with the gestation period for ministers and the Prime Minister being much shorter.

Fresh from a strong electoral mandate in the GE slightly more than two weeks ago, Mr Lee had a free hand to pick from 83 Members-elect of Parliament (MPs-elect), especially those elected for the first time.

This was in stark contrast to his Cabinet appointments unveiled shortly after the May 2011 GE. Back then, the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) had delivered its worst electoral performance, lost five MPs that included three ministers, and also saw the retirement of the late Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew and then Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong and three other ministers from Cabinet. Mr Lee Hsien Loong had described the changes then as "epochal".

TESTING THE 4G LEADERS

For Prime Minister Lee, forming his latest Cabinet was going to be a challenge as some of the 4G leaders are still political rookies who will have to be tested.

This could perhaps explain the appointment of three "wise men": Coordinating ministers in the areas of national security, economic and social policies, and infrastructure.

While it indicates the weight placed on the Government's ability to join the dots across various policy initiatives in a more complex governance environment, they also provide mentorship to the 4G leaders within each major policy domain.

Even if the Government's preference is for incremental change, the new line-up enables the Government to have a keen eye and ear for system-wide effects that come from issues that increasingly cut across various government ministries and agencies.

Mr Lee continues to pursue the conscious policy of having younger office-holders cut their teeth and hone their political acumen in what were previously regarded as not-so-glamorous ministries, such as the MSF and the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) as well as the labour movement.

There were pleasant surprises in having two ministers helm one ministry — in Trade and Industry and in Education.

Former Education Minister Heng Swee Keat will step into the big shoes of Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam in the Finance Ministry. It is perhaps a homecoming for Mr Heng, who was the former Monetary Authority of Singapore chief before entering politics.

WOMEN REPRESENTATION

Fourth-generation women MPs continue to feature prominently in the office-holders' line-up, although no one from the GE2015 cohort was appointed. Ms Grace Fu helms her own ministry, the MCCY, for the first time. The last time a woman helmed a ministry was in 1991 when Dr Seet Ai Mee briefly headed the Ministry of Community Development as Acting Minister.

The signalling effect of the strongest-ever women representation in the top ranks of Government should not be underestimated. It is often said that women hold up half the sky: Their perspectives and insights will be invaluable, encouraging more women to step forth and serve the nation.

STAGE SET FOR 4G LEADERS

The stage is now set for the 4G leadership to rise to the fore over the next four to five years. They will hit the ground running, their learning curves will be steep as the wheels of Government in today's political landscape will not slow down on account of their being new to their portfolios.

Nor will the pace become less relentless merely because of the infusion of new blood and more office-holders. If anything, public expectations and demands will grow and leadership abilities will be tested.

The 4G leadership will have to demonstrate not just technocratic know-how and skilful problem solving but also sophisticated political nous and sensitivity to competing and even conflicting interests and needs. They will have to become more politician-like even as they deep dig into their technocratic expertise.

As policy trade-offs are already becoming more evident and will have to be explicitly laid out, how the political leadership engages Singaporeans and stewards the country through the various policy options will be an integral part of the governance agenda.

It is still too early to determine who will be the first among equals in the 4G leadership, but it should be clearer in about three years' time. The Cabinet is likely to be streamlined in the years ahead as office-holders are retired to make way for new blood.

As it stands, almost 45 per cent of the PAP MPs elected in September have been made office-holders, another indicator of the deep transition that is taking place.

Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans alike will closely watch, engage and assess how the 4G leadership performs. It is an understatement that much will be

expected of them. After all, how the top echelon of our political leadership performs will significantly affect the destiny of Singapore and Singaporeans.

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