

## **In first speech as Prime Minister, Lawrence Wong showed he wants to be a 'different type of leader': Analysts**

***Singaporeans' expectations of the government are now vastly different from the time of previous Prime Ministers, says one political analyst.***

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SINGAPORE: Prime Minister Lawrence Wong wants to set himself apart from his predecessors and be measured against his own words, said political analysts of his first speech as the country's leader.

The 51-year-old was sworn in as Singapore's fourth Prime Minister on Wednesday (May 15), marking the third handover of leadership in Singapore's 59-year history.

"Shaped by these experiences, our leadership style will differ from that of previous generations," said Mr Wong after he was sworn in by Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon.

"We will lead in our own way. We will continue to think boldly and to think far. We know that there is still much more to do ... and the best chapters of our Singapore story lie ahead."

Independent political analyst Felix Tan said Mr Wong wanted to tell Singaporeans that he would be a different type of Prime Minister.

"Listening to him and how he positioned his Forward Singapore (exercise), it seems as if he's clearly showing he wants to focus more on the heart of the people, of Singaporeans, more so than anything else," he said.

The previous three Prime Ministers were more focused on pragmatic or practical matters, like the economy, Dr Tan added.

The new Prime Minister might hope Singaporeans would measure his performance against what he said he would do, "not as a comparison to the previous few generations", said Dr Tan.

"He wants us to give him a chance to show that he means what he says."

Mr Wong took his oath of office on the front lawn of the Istana on Wednesday night, along with the rest of his Cabinet, including new Deputy Prime Minister Gan Kim Yong, who is also Minister of Trade and Industry.

Former Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was also sworn in as Senior Minister on Wednesday night.

Mr Wong is taking over a "very different landscape" compared to the three previous Prime Ministers, said Dr Tan.

Singaporeans are now more affluent, educated, globalised and exposed to more opportunities.

“Therefore, their expectations of the government would be vastly different from the previous Prime Minister. Their focus is more so on what else can the government give them? What else can the government do that they themselves can’t get?”

Good politicians and leaders need to set themselves apart at the start of their tenure as head of government, said Dr Alan Chong, a senior fellow at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).

“You have to tell people: ‘Do not judge me according to the yardstick of my predecessors. Judge me on my own.’”

The Prime Ministers who came before Mr Wong – Mr Lee and Mr Goh Chok Tong – similarly tried to set themselves apart from their predecessors, said Dr Chong Ja Ian, a political scientist and associate professor at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

“Leadership style is one thing, but there needs to be substance to follow style as well,” he said.

The government has already consulted and heard from Singaporeans through the Forward Singapore exercise, he noted.

Going forward, in the months ahead, Mr Wong would need to “make his case to people on why his direction is one we need to be invested in”.

He has to “bring Singaporeans with him. Because that’s why he’s the leader”, Dr Chong added.

## **CONSULTATIVE AND INCLUSIVE**

The analysts also said Mr Wong’s tone in his first speech showed that he wants to be a consultative and inclusive leader.

“It’s a very kindly tone, almost uncle-like or fatherly, that people can relate to,” said RSIS’ Dr Chong.

“And the invitation to people in the middle generations, people in their 30s and 40s to come join him in shaping the next chapter of the Singapore story. I thought that was also a very nice, inclusive touch.”

Dr Teo Kay Key, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), noted that Mr Wong referenced younger Singaporeans, who have different ideas about success and what they want to achieve in life.

When he spoke about how his team would do things differently, he was likely talking to this group, she said.

“In the speech, it sounds more like he is addressing the current Singapore society and what he thinks this society wants,” said Dr Teo.

Mr Wong has said his team is prepared to re-examine assumptions and embrace different versions of success, she added, noting that his speech emphasised “Team Singapore” and the idea of strength in unity.

“This emphasis on the Singapore spirit, I think it’s something that is timely and resonates with most of his remarks since the pandemic,” said RSIS’ Dr Chong.

“On balance, I thought it was an encouraging speech. It was gentle in its tone of inclusivity.”