

Heng Swee Keat press conference & other observations on the ground

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Heng Swee Keat, still the Deputy Prime Minister (DPM), announced on April 8 his decision to [stand aside as leader](#) of the fourth generation (4G) team of the People's Action Party (PAP).

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong revealed that Heng will also relinquish his portfolio as Minister for Finance at the next Cabinet reshuffle, which is scheduled in the next couple of weeks.

Here are some of Mothership's observations on the ground in the Istana press conference.

1. Heng Swee Keat's many selfless acts in his political career

In his letter accepting Heng's decision to take himself out of the running as next prime minister, PM Lee thanked Heng for his "selfless decision to stand aside".

PM Lee also said that Heng's actions were fully in keeping with the spirit of public service and sense of duty that motivated him to step forward.

Could Heng have continued as the next PM even though he will be the oldest PM in Singapore's history?

Yes, he could have done so, but Heng chose not to.

He said:

"This year, I am 60. As the crisis will be prolonged, I would be close to the mid-60s when the crisis is over.

The 60s are still a very productive time of life. But when I also consider the ages at which our first three prime ministers took on the job, I would have too short a runway should I become the next prime minister then."

Heng also felt that he "would have too short a runway" if he becomes the top man.

He believed that Singapore needs a leader who will not only rebuild Singapore post-Covid-19 but also lead the next phase of the national-building effort.

Heng will soon be celebrating his 10th year anniversary as a politician since entering politics in May 2011.

In his political career, it was one selfless act after another.

For instance, Heng could have taken a back seat after his stroke in 2016.

But he was back at work in the Ministry of Finance within a few months to deliver the 2017 Budget.

And Heng subsequently ended up delivering a record 10 budgets after he became the Finance Minister in October 2015.

And how about the decision to leave his safe seat in Tampines GRC to contest in East Coast?

During last year's GE, Heng led a five-member PAP to secure about 53 per cent of the vote at East Coast GRC, winning against the Worker's Party.

And Heng did it by reducing the national swing against PAP, won against a strong WP team fronted by Nicole Seah, and achieved one of the best PAP results against WP.

With these selfless acts by Heng over the years, the ruling PAP has Heng to thank for allowing the party to refresh its 4G leadership, securing East Coast GRC and delivering a record 10 budgets.

As PM Lee noted in his [Facebook tribute](#) to Heng on April 8:

"Swee Keat, you have always served Singapore with sincerity and diligence. Your decision today is a good reminder that Singapore is not about any one person - it depends on all of us, working together, to get the best results for Singapore".

2. The statement from the enlarged 4G team: a 3.5G?

On Jan. 4, 2018, 16 ministers from the 4G issued a joint statement saying that they were "conscious of their responsibility, are working closely together as a team and will settle on a leader among us in good time".

This was in response to Emeritus Senior Minister (ESM) Goh Chok Tong's remarks at the end of 2017 that 4G leaders should settle the question of leadership early by 2018.

On Nov. 23, 2018, 32 ministers and MPs (including Heng himself) issued a joint statement:

"We have been carefully considering the issue of leadership for the team. In January, we issued a statement that we will choose a leader "in good time". Now we have a consensus that the team will be led by Swee Keat".

This occurred after the ruling PAP appointed Heng and Chan Chun Sing as the first assistant secretary-general and second assistant secretary-general respectively.

On Apr. 8, 2018, 32 PAP senior leaders (including all political office holders from MOS and Speaker and NTUC Sec-Gen) paid tribute to Heng and made two requests.

They asked for more time to select another leader amongst us, and requested PM Lee to stay on as PM until such time when a new successor is chosen by the team and is ready to take over.

While the statement is significant, what is notable is the inclusion of several ministers and political office-holders seen as 3G leaders.

They now include veteran Ministers like Ng Eng Hen, Gan Kim Yong and K Shanmugam.

The make-up of this group now hews close to a thesis made by Associate Professor Terence Lee in *Voting in A Time of Change: Singapore's 2020 General Election*.

He said that Singaporeans are "poised to see a blend of 4G leaders with some 3G leaders remaining in their place a fair bit longer than intended".

In other words, the next 4G leader "would really be leading Singapore's transitional 3.5G group of ministers rather than a 4G government".

3. The next 4G leader is probably sitting at the press conference

As the old saying goes, "A picture is worth a thousand words."

The attendees of this important press conference included PM Lee, health minister and PAP chairman Gan Kim Yong, and DPM and first assistant secretary-general Heng -- leaders of the party.

They also included Ministers Masagos Zulkifli and Grace Fu, who were present in the PAP post GE2020 press conference.

The make-up of the political leaders in this important press conference reveals that there are a few leaders among the 4G group who can best represent the collective will and consensus of the 4G team.

They are ministers Chan Chun Sing, Ong Ye Kung, Lawrence Wong and Desmond Lee.

And it's no wonder that all four of them are now seen by many political observers and media, including [The Straits Times](#) and [Lianhe Zaobao](#), as possible picks for the next 4G leader.

All four sit on the PAP's central executive committee, with three of them holding appointments in the party.

But it's not about the individual, as Ong noted:

"Over time, the individual members rally around someone who will then emerge as the leader, first among equals. First among equals doesn't mean the person is the boss that directs people to do work, but (is) the person that can best bring out the talent and strengths of everybody else, and be a team builder".

Such a person may favour a 4G leader who is slightly older, such as Chan Chun Sing, Ong Ye Kung, and Lawrence Wong, who are between the ages of 48 and 51.

4. PM's cabinet reshuffle & appointment of new finance minister will hint at who next 4G leader may be

As Gillian Koh, deputy research director at the Institute of Policy Studies, noted in a [CNA](#) interview, Singaporeans can look out for who will take over the finance portfolio.

"The Ministry of Finance portfolio should go to a prime minister-in-waiting if the 4G wants to provide some forward momentum to the question," she said.

Finance is, needless to say, one of Singapore's most important ministries — our past two prime ministers -- PM Lee and ESM Goh -- both had a hand in the Finance Ministry in one way or another.

PM Lee was a former finance minister, while ESM Goh was a former senior minister of state for finance.

The late PM Lee Kuan Yew was, of course, an exception: He started out as PM even before Singapore's independence.

Chan Chun Sing appears to be a possible choice for the next finance minister, considering that he has been at MTI for nearly three years. This means that the time is ripe for a new portfolio.

Chan was appointed as the minister for trade and industry, and as minister-in-charge of public service since May 1, 2018.

A straightforward choice would be Wong. This is because Wong was appointed as second minister for finance in 2016 to support Heng. And Wong is currently still a second minister for finance.

However, it is also possible for PM Lee to consider Ong. Finance is not an unfamiliar territory for Ong, as he has been a board member for the Monetary Authority of Singapore since August 2016.

However, for both Wong and Ong, it will be disruptive for their ministries (MOE and MOT) if they were to give up their portfolios after helming their respective ministry for less than a year.

As PM Lee noted in his press conference, there will also be "consequential moves" in other ministries.

This means that PM Lee may well perform the most extensive restructuring of his Cabinet since May 2011.

Not every person who serves as finance minister will go on to become PM.

After all, there have been many finance ministers who did not (Lim Kin San, Goh Keng Swee, Hon Sui Sen, our Tony Tan, and Richard Hu, for instance) — but whoever does is certainly in the running to be the "first among equals" to succeed him.