

Issues Come Before Stars

By GILLIAN KOH

SINGAPORE'S new Prime Minister, Mr Lee Hsien Loong, has already announced his Cabinet. There are changes but perhaps not the ones some were looking for.

They had hoped to see rising stars (read 'potential prime ministers') fill the positions of deputy prime minister (DPM), but those were filled instead by old stalwarts.

What the line-up does say, however, is that issues matter more than signalling designated successors. In any event, the rising stars are already there, and are now confirmed as such.

What do I mean?

First, what is noteworthy about Mr Lee's Cabinet is that it will seek to be more inclusive of women and youth. Mr Lee has affirmed that there are women on the People's Action Party bench who are worthy to be office-holders.

There is also now a ministry to nurture the youth constituency. With Dr Vivian Balakrishnan as its head, the new portfolio suggests a desire on the part of the Government to engage the young and respond to their concerns and aspirations.

Second, the Government is restructuring itself to deal with strategic issues. Water, for instance, will now be dealt with in a holistic way.

It used to be addressed departmentally, as a question of demand, pricing and delivery, under the Public Utilities Board and Ministry of Trade and Industry.

Now, in the newly reorganised Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources, these issues will be integrated with the more critical questions of alternative sources, use and re-use, all under one roof.

Another set of issues with long-term implications is the outstanding bilateral and legal disputes with our neighbours. Placing Professor S. Jayakumar in the DPM position signals where these rank on the new leader's agenda.

Through the mechanism of 'interlocking directorships', as it were, Prof Jayakumar will be able to coordinate the resources of the Law Ministry with those of his former portfolio, Foreign Affairs, to address these bilateral issues.

This form of 'boundary-less' government is replicated in other areas. There are, for instance, synergies to be gained if the perspectives and considerations that guide the work of the Manpower Ministry can be shared with the Education Ministry - as indeed they can be now through the person of Dr Ng Eng Hen, who will have positions in both ministries.

As for others who hold double portfolios, it would seem they are being given the opportunity to see which suit of clothes may fit them best.

Dr Ng, Mr Khaw Boon Wan and Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam have, predictably, been confirmed as ministers.

But more can be expected from Mr Tharman, as he has also been made deputy chairman of the Monetary Authority of Singapore, something that has no clear relationship to his Education portfolio. He will oversee the current round of reform in education, but perhaps his time there will be finite and his destiny may lie in finance and economics.

All this suggests leadership renewal is taking place, slowly but surely. Those judging its progress by looking at the identities of the DPMs may think otherwise.

But the very fact that stalwarts of the second generation are filling the DPM posts means there is room for contestation for the fourth-generation leadership.

SOCIAL COMPACT

THERE are two broad aspects of governance that I believe the new Government should explore.

First, I would urge the new team to address the question of affordability. The Goh Chok Tong government had not only overseen a greater introduction of the market into government services, but had also categorically committed the Government to provide affordable basic services.

Is it possible to roll back the state further? Are there enough social safety nets to assuage the anxieties of the common folk? Are we looking at more direct transfers? Are the better-off prepared to take care of the least among us? What form will the 'social compact' between state and citizens take during Mr Lee's tenure?

Second, I hope he will be able to take our sense of nationhood to a higher plane. While the Goh government rightly focused on understanding and engaging younger Singaporeans, Mr Lee's challenge will be to balance that with the needs and demands of our older citizens.

A recent publication, *Does Class Matter?* by Dr Tan Ern Ser, had a curious table in it. It showed that older Singaporeans feel 'politically alienated', suggesting that their desire to be heard is not matched by opportunities.

Add to this their fear of retrenchment and worries of not finding re-employment. Globalisation and its attendant social dislocations are impacting Singaporeans unevenly, placing older workers in greater peril than others.

MORE HEARTWARE

IT IS heartening to see that the new Government will be even more inclusive than the previous, which notably sought to reach out to the post-Independence generation, minorities and, more recently, those who choose to lead alternative lifestyles.

My plea is for more by way of policies and heartware to pull the nation together and emphasise our commonality rather than our differences.

There should be something for everyone, and everyone should be for everyone else in Mr Lee's 'Progressive Singapore'.

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