

'A culture shift' with coordinating ministers

Rachel Au-Yong, Charissa Yong

***The Straits Times*, 30 September 2015**

The appointment of three veterans as coordinating ministers this week could spark a culture shift in the way the civil service tackles challenges that cut across multiple agencies, observers said yesterday.

They also noted that while the impact of this move may not be immediately visible to the public, these changes to the Cabinet could improve how policies are drawn up and put into practice.

For instance, when new Housing Board flats are built, new Coordinating Minister for Infrastructure Khaw Boon Wan can plan for roads and other facilities to be ready before residents move in, Nee Soon GRC MP Lee Bee Wah said.

On Monday, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced that Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean will remain Coordinating Minister for National Security, a post he has held since 2011. DPM Tharman Shanmugaratnam will be Coordinating Minister for Economic and Social Policies, a role Mr Lee noted he had already been doing.

Associate Professor Bilveer Singh of the National University of Singapore said the three men's experience and standing could see civil servants, who tend to focus on their fields, cooperate more.

PUSH FOR COORDINATED ACTION

The benefits of three coordinating ministers in government are clear. These are heavyweight ministers with the clout, gumption and experience to provide the powerful push for coordinated action across government on vital areas of increasing complexity and urgency.

MS IRENE NG, former Tampines GRC MP

"In our Asian culture, personalities drive the institutions. Whenever there are problems, we must be able to turn to the 'Big Man', a powerful minister who can insist on and enforce cooperation and intelligence sharing. Fortunately we have them in Teo Chee Hean, Tharman and Khaw," he said.

He noted that the success of having a coordinating minister for security issues has shown how such a role can help tackle other complex issues. Mr Teo is the fourth minister to coordinate security matters since the role was created in 2003.

Prof Singh said Singapore has thus far also avoided a terror attack like the August bombing at Bangkok's Erawan shrine. He said: "The experience of having a Coordinating Minister for Security was invaluable in informing political leaders and civil servants of the need for broad-based efforts to manage domestic and external challenges."

Observers added that a coordinating minister could likewise minimise the danger of other ministries and agencies operating in silos.

Professor Neo Boon Siong of the Nanyang Business School said the setting up of the Municipal Services Office last year to better tackle local issues that involve various bodies was

evidence that agencies are sometimes hampered by insufficient coordination and resource constraints. He noted that at times, "on issues like immigration, the right hand didn't know what the left hand was doing".

"Until and unless there's an identified problem - like the interministerial committee on climate change - coordination across all ministries is not always there."

Prof Neo added that, contrary to fears that a coordinating minister will add another layer of bureaucracy, the role puts in place a problem-solving mechanism. "When a priority problem emerges, the coordinating minister can get the right people together, and implementation can be ongoing within each (agency)," he said.

Analysts said the net effect of these changes could see more well-rounded policies. Said Dr Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies: "Hopefully there will be less gaps, and Government will not be blindsided in public policymaking. It will then leave enough bandwidth for them to cope with the real surprises if they ever come."