

ASK DPM THARMAN SPECIAL; CABINET: More left-of-centre now

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The Cabinet has shifted to the left in how it views social policy and helping the lower income, Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam said.

"If I compare our thinking in Cabinet, or the weight of thinking in Cabinet, when I first entered politics about 11 years ago, I would say the weight of thinking was centrist but there were two flanks on either side of it.

"There were some who were a little right-of-centre, and there were some a little left-of-centre," he said. "Now I would say the weight of thinking is left-of-centre. You still get diversity of views in Cabinet, but the centre of gravity is left-of-centre."

Mr Tharman said the current team in charge is clearly "focused on upgrading the lives and improving the lives of lower-income Singaporeans and older folk too".

"Those are two very important social objectives and we're going to succeed. We're going to do something to improve life for these two very important groups of Singaporeans."

The Government is also still determined to keep the economy competitive to help the majority. And moving to the left does not mean the Government is and will become populist, he added.

Typically, a "left-leaning" government would be more concerned with social equity, developing policies that increase the presence of the state in areas such as social welfare.

Analysts agreed that there has been a shift in how the ruling People's Action Party has governed Singapore over the years.

While it started out being democratic socialist in approach, it embarked on market-oriented reforms from the 1980s, said Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh. "Today, there is a re-evaluation of the second stage to recognise the need for greater state intervention to mitigate for unequal outcomes and temper the effects of social stratification that might result from market orientation," she said.

But National University of Singapore associate professor Tan Ern Ser believes the shift has not been radical, noting the core fundamentals of governance remain the same - sustainable provisions, fiscal prudence, co-payment and encouraging self-reliance. "I guess Singaporeans expect the Government to do more to protect them from risks and vulnerabilities, and the party that is best able to deliver this protection is more likely to be elected," he said. "The party that continues to harp on individual responsibility and self-reliance may run the risk of defeat."