

Do-it-yourself ministers gaining notice

Unannounced visits give them a better feel of the ground, they say

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In recent months, a few ministers have turned up unannounced at places where most would not expect to find them.

Transport Minister Lui Tuck Yew went to MRT stations and rode the trains.

Acting Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports Chan Chun Sing dropped in on homes for the destitute and disabled.

Minister of State Tan Chuan-Jin joined an evening raid on two foreign worker dormitories.

Then there were the four ministers who joined Singaporeans to walk along the Malayan Railway tracks, after it was announced that train services would halt with the relocation of Tanjong Pagar station to Woodlands.

The four were National Development Minister Khaw Boon Wan, Environment and Water Resources Minister Vivian Balakrishnan, Law and Foreign Minister K. Shanmugam and Mr Tan.

The do-it-yourself, or DIY, approach of these ministers has caught the attention of some Singaporeans.

Security supervisor Tay Eng Mee, 64, was one of the 94,000 commuters affected by the Dec 17 North-South Line disruption.

He is glad that Mr Lui has been on the ground to monitor the situation, saying that it shows the minister is 'sincere about doing his job and solving the problem'.

Production editor and daily commuter Huang Kaiquan, 26, said there was no better way for a minister to 'know what people are griping about than to take the train when it's packed like sardines'.

But others wonder if ministers are walking the ground merely to show Singaporeans they are not divorced from people's daily difficulties.

Dr Terence Chong of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies said that in the new political climate after last May's General Election (GE), ministers might find they need to show people more of the work they do in a 'public performance of empathy'.

Dr Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies said ministers know what is happening on the ground.

But they now realise they have to boost their visibility to win over the public and in some cases, 'a picture is worth a thousand words'.

The ministers themselves said they just want to do their jobs as best they can.

Mr Lui said he needs to be on the ground to see if reality matches the feedback he receives. He hopes his visits help him 'ask better questions and ultimately, make better decisions'.

'I do what I think is necessary so I can have a better understanding of my job and hopefully, be able to do a better job,' he told The Straits Times via e-mail.

'Making unannounced visits, observing what is happening on the ground for myself and getting an unvarnished feel of what the actual situation is, is necessary and helpful,' he added.

Mr Tan, the Minister of State for Manpower and National Development, makes it a point to meet a wide range of people, including migrant worker advocacy groups and conservation activists.

He said: 'I have found it useful to bring different interest groups together to discuss issues from their perspectives.'

Other ministers take a different approach to walking the ground - they alert those they plan to visit but not the media.

Among them is Deputy Prime Minister and Home Affairs Minister Teo Chee Hean, who took the Malayan Railway train on the quiet to observe the transfer in operations from Tanjong Pagar to Woodlands Train Checkpoint.

Health Minister Gan Kim Yong went to hospitals, nursing homes and polyclinics.

Education Minister Heng Swee Keat was a guest at the Pre-University Seminar last June but chose to sit unnoticed at the back of a hall for more than an hour, to listen to students' presentations.

He said he prefers not to disrupt proceedings or affect the candour of discussions.

He also stressed that it is his belief in working together with educators at the front line and with the community that 'shapes my interaction, rather than a reaction after the GE'.

Mr Heng also does not believe in making unannounced visits to schools to try and catch educators out.

That is not helpful in generating trust between educators and those at the ministry's headquarters, and trust is what matters in the long run, he said.

Project manager and parent of two, Mr Tan Gin Tat, 40, gave a thumbs up to Mr Heng's school visits.

However, he added: 'If Mr Heng is walking down the school corridors, I hope he doesn't just talk to the top people but chats with teachers on the problems they are facing on imparting knowledge to kids.'

Teacher Laremy Lee, 28, however, wants more unannounced visits to be made. Schools and teachers sometimes 'stage a show' for office-holders on planned visits, he said.

Blogger Alex Au said ministers' hands-on involvement is welcome 'if it's a precursor to policy change'.

He added: 'If it's only for show, it will be bad, because it will raise hopes only for people to be let down.'