

Gradual pace of Cabinet changes welcomed MPs, political observers say approach serves country's interests well

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“INCREDIBLE PARTNERSHIP

I have worked closely with Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng and Home Team officers in the last 2-1/2 years. It was an eye-opening and memorable experience. DPM has, over the last 17 years, built the Home Team into a strong and dynamic institution, with highly disciplined officers committed to protect and defend Singapore's safety and security. I have had the privilege of working with and learning from DPM Wong, senior Home Team commanders and officers. The camaraderie within the Home Team and its strong partnership with the community are quite incredible.

Law and Second Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam (photo), who takes over fully as Home Affairs Minister from Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng on Monday, in an e-mailed reply yesterday when asked for his comments “

THE changes Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has been making to his Cabinet over the years are seen by many as incremental moves - and the approach was lauded by Members of Parliament and political observers yesterday.

They said the gradual pace serves Singapore well by allowing newcomers to be tested more thoroughly while retaining the valuable services of experienced, old hands.

But some, like Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC MP Charles Chong and former MP Teo Chong Tee feel the approach could delay fresh ideas and inhibit bold and swift actions in abnormal situations. Their comments came a day after Mr Lee announced what he said was a 'minor adjustment' to his Cabinet.

The changes, involving four ministers, are to take effect on Monday.

Law Minister K. Shanmugam will take over the reins of the Home Affairs Ministry from Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng, who will become Coordinating Minister for National Security.

Mr Wong's new portfolio is held by Professor S. Jayakumar, who will remain Senior Minister in the Prime Minister's Office and oversee foreign policy matters which cut across different ministries, and take charge of foreign policy issues which involve legal negotiation or international adjudication.

Mr Lui Tuck Yew, the Acting Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts, is promoted to full minister in the same ministry. Four lower-level office-holders will also be promoted in their present ministries.

Commenting on Mr Lee's moves, Dr Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies said: 'The PM seems to prefer doing things in a very paced, predictable way so there aren't many surprises. The public knows what to expect.'

Agreeing, Mr Chong added: 'This makes Singapore politics very boring, but it's not necessarily a bad thing.'

Other observers said the gentle approach to transitions did not deviate from the style of previous prime ministers: Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong and Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew.

PM Lee became prime minister in 2004. Instead of making drastic changes to the Cabinet, which analysts say tends to be the norm when new prime ministers take office in other parliamentary democracies, Mr Lee chose to make the changes in phases.

He has announced six Cabinet reshuffles.

In all, three ministers retired - Dr Tony Tan, Mr Yeo Cheow Tong and Dr Lee Boon Yang. And six were roped in: Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, Mr Raymond Lim, Mr Shanmugam, Mr Gan Kim Yong, Mrs Lim Hwee Hua and Mr Lui.

For the incoming ministers, the gradual moves give them time to develop a deeper understanding of the issues before they take charge fully, said Ang Mo Kio GRC MP Inderjit Singh.

Former MP Chin Tet Yung added that a phased rise would ensure they are tried and tested. If these tests are not rigorous, said Tampines GRC MP Irene Ng, people may 'lose faith in the political system and the quality of people in Cabinet'.

Also, the testing can be two-way, said Dr Koh: 'The new ministers can see if their portfolios suit them, and if they suit their portfolios.'

Older ministers who stay on in mentoring or coordinating roles also add value with their experience, insight and ability to spot problems from afar.

'Just like in a football team, you want to have people who have had exposure,' said West Coast GRC MP Arthur Fong. 'They can still contribute their ideas, or even play the devil's advocate. To cast them aside for the sake of renewal is not a step forward.'

This stable, predictable process also ensures business confidence, said both Mr Fong and Mr Chong.

However, moving gradually could have its drawbacks.

Said former MP Teo: 'If a minister stays in place for too long, new ideas may not surface as quickly.'

Mr Chong felt that in an unexpected crisis, 'gradualism may not be the best course of action' because bold changes would need to be made swiftly.

Analysts agreed the Cabinet was not likely to undergo any more significant change until after the next general election, due by February 2012.

When that happens, the make-up of the fourth generation of leaders would become clearer, they added.

'Now, you can only reshuffle the same deck of cards. After the election, the new cards are in there, and the PM, if he wants to make changes then, will have more aces up his sleeve,' said Mr Chong.

He also expressed his desire for a more gender-balanced Cabinet then: 'I would really like to see more women ministers. Of course, they must also qualify by merit.'