

Mah's 20 years of hard decisions

Road congestion, soaring housing prices - he had to deal with them all

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In his 20 years as a minister, Mr Mah Bow Tan has handled some of Singapore's most demanding portfolios.

As Minister of Communications from 1991 to 1999, he oversaw the implementation of the controversial Certificate of Entitlement (COE) and Electronic Road Pricing (ERP) schemes to control the car population to avoid road congestion.

He was also concurrently Environment Minister between 1993 and 1995, and had been Minister of State for Trade and Industry before that, in 1990 and 1991.

But it is as National Development Minister - a post he has held since 1999 - that Mr Mah, 62, is most widely known to most Singaporeans.

The former Colombo Plan Scholar and President's Scholar will step down from the Cabinet, handing the reins of the housing ministry to Mr Khaw Boon Wan, currently the Health Minister.

In a surprise move yesterday, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced Mr Mah's retirement alongside those of Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng and Transport Minister Raymond Lim.

The trio had been involved in policies or events that emerged as hot-button issues in the May 7 General Election.

For Mr Mah, discontent over the relentless rise in home prices cost him a convincing win in Tampines GRC.

His team pulled in 57.2 per cent of the votes in Tampines, with the rest going to a team largely comprised of unknowns from the National Solidarity Party (NSP).

Yesterday, the NSP welcomed the news of his retirement.

'Although the voters did not make a very clear-cut statement by personally voting out (Mr Mah), they have put sufficient pressure on the Prime Minister to do something about it... and he has heeded the call,' said Mr Goh Meng Seng, the NSP's secretary-general.

'I think that is a way towards democracy growth.'

But he added: 'This is only a first step. Whether there are significant changes coming, and whether there is any change in policy that will effectively solve the problem we're facing right now, is up to everyone to judge.'

A property analyst, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said Mr Mah may have reacted too slowly to a surge in housing demand so as to avoid repeating the overbuilding that depressed property prices for years in the early 2000s.

'It may not be wise to have the same guy for too long - he's trapped into certain policy decisions or scarred by some mistakes in the past,' the analyst added.

But other commentators disagreed that Mr Mah alone should take the fall for the unhappiness over housing.

'He's been in a difficult position because he's had to cope with a lot of global circumstances and conditions, brought right up to Singapore's doorstep,' said Dr Gillian Koh, senior fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, referring to the influx of foreigners and the wave of liquidity into the country amid an exuberant market.

DBS economist Irvin Seah also noted that bottlenecks in Singapore's housing infrastructure mean that housing policy here is inexorably headed for change, regardless of who is in charge of the National Development Ministry.

Still, Mr Mah had seemed eminently qualified to head one of the hottest ministries in property-obsessed Singapore.

A first-class honours graduate in industrial engineering from the University of New South Wales in Australia, he joined the public sector as an Administrative Officer in 1973.

In 2000, then Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew singled him out for praise in Parliament, saying that although Mr Mah is 'not a natural crowd-puller or a mobiliser', he 'has judgment' and 'is competent and effective'.

On the NSP's Facebook page for Tampines yesterday, the reaction was succinct. 'Mah Bow Tan is out,' a post read. 'Effort not wasted, money well spent.'

Over on Mr Mah's Facebook page, he posted a message to his Tampines constituents: 'Dear residents, as you've probably heard by now, I'm retiring from the Cabinet. But I'll still be your MP, so (I) look forward to working with other MPs to serve you.'

He also congratulated Mr Heng Swee Keat, his team-mate in Tampines GRC, on his appointment as Education Minister.