

## Analysts taken aback by move, but say Chuan-Jin is 'best choice'

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Political observers and social service leaders interviewed by TODAY were caught off guard by yesterday's announcement that Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had nominated Mr Tan Chuan-Jin as Speaker.

However, they welcomed the news that Mr Desmond Lee will be taking over the mantle at the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF).

They told this newspaper that they thought that Mr Tan, 48, had been earmarked for greater responsibilities in the Cabinet. Still, they believed that his experience in helming the MSF and the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) would put him in good stead to preside over parliamentary proceedings.

Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director for research at the Institute of Policy Studies, said many people would have thought that the role of Speaker would be filled by a senior backbencher. "While the role of Speaker is an important procedural, institutional as well as a ceremonial role, it is not one that has strategic input into policymaking," she said.

Agreeing, former Member of Parliament Inderjit Singh said he had expected PM Lee to appoint one of the third-generation leaders, such as Manpower Minister Lim Swee Say or Minister of Trade and Industry (Trade) Lim Hng Kiang. Mr Singh, who retired from politics in 2015, said if Mr Tan were appointed as Speaker, it would be a "loss for the Cabinet".

"It is a pity we are losing a key member, especially when there is just a small group of key members in the fourth-generation leadership," he said.

Tipped as a core member of the 4G leadership since he joined politics in 2011, Mr Tan's political career seems to be taking an unusual trajectory, the observers said. "It is unusual for a Cabinet Minister in his prime to be made Speaker," said Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan. "While he can always return to Cabinet, his role as Speaker does take him away from the main action ... It suggests he might not feature prominently in the leadership succession plan."

He noted that, if elected, Mr Tan is likely to wear the Speaker's hat until the next General Election, which is due by April 2021.

"I don't see how he could make up for time away from the Cabinet and helming ministries," said Assoc Prof Tan.

Since Singapore's independence in 1965, the only other former Cabinet Minister to become Speaker was Mr Abdullah Tarmugi. Before he was made the seventh Speaker at the age of 58 in 2002, Mr Tarmugi served as Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports (1994 to 2000) and Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs (1993 to 2002). He retired from politics in 2011.

Mr Tan's nomination as Speaker will be put to a vote in Parliament on Monday. If elected, he will replace Madam Halimah Yacob, who has resigned to contest the coming Presidential Election.

Dr Felix Tan, an associate lecturer at SIM Global Education, felt that Mr Tan's "fair and balanced" demeanour makes him a good candidate for a Speaker. "The role of a Speaker is an important one since it is second to the President," he pointed out.

Praising Mr Tan's work at the MSF, social service leaders said his departure from the ministry would be a loss. Ms Saleemah Ismail, co-founder of New Life Stories, a non-profit organisation that supports children of incarcerated mothers, said Mr Tan was constantly looking to bridge gaps between the Government and civil societies.

SPD president Chia Yong Yong, who is also a Nominated Member of Parliament, said Mr Tan has the "ability to relate to ground needs while balancing national priorities". But she added: "I think Desmond will have a lot to contribute to the social services sector. He is someone who has heart and cares for the vulnerable."

The analysts also noted Mr Lee's rapid rise up the ranks. His impending appointment comes soon after he was made full Minister in May. "It is evident that he will be earmarked for more important portfolios in the future," said Nanyang Technological University Assistant Professor Woo Jun Jie.

The Prime Minister's Office also announced yesterday that Mrs Josephine Teo, who was also promoted in May, will replace Mr Lee as Second Minister in the Home Affairs Ministry. She will step down as Second Minister in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but continue her portfolios in the Prime Minister's Office and the MOM. Dr Felix Tan said: "Mrs Teo's role in the new Cabinet line-up clearly demonstrates that women are very much capable of more leadership roles."