

A two-in-one statement about Singapore's 4G leadership

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The announcement on November 23 by the ruling People's Action Party that there is consensus among its fourth-generation (4G) leaders for Finance Minister Mr Heng Swee Keat to be the first among equals has been met with a chorus of approval online.

Those around the world with interests in Singapore will recognise the party's effort at ensuring that the country's political outlook is as clear and predictable as it can be, with Mr Heng slated to take over from Mr Lee Hsien Loong as prime minister and as PAP secretary-secretary in a few years' time.

Mr Heng, the new PAP first assistant secretary-general, has in turn selected Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing to be his deputy.

Doubts arising from Mr Heng's health in spite of his swift recovery from a stroke in May 2016 should be dispelled by the two-in-one declaration where the successor also announces his deputy - alongside the resilient Mr Heng is the younger and conscientious Mr Chan.

With Mr Chan and a strong core of other 4G leaders, there are several rungs of talent to draw upon to manage this political risk arising from health and any other types of it that could emerge in the future.

After all, since the extensive April 2018 Cabinet reshuffle, nine ministries out of 16 are already helmed by 4G leaders and they are getting the necessary leadership experience and exposure under their belts.

This provides the context for the emphasis on complementarity and teamwork between Mr Heng and Mr Chan as well as among the full set of younger leaders.

Mr Chan said in a Facebook post after the announcement that teamwork would be "critical".

PM Lee said the pair "have complementary strengths, and make a strong pairing" and added: "They and the other younger office holders have gradually come together, to work as a team and make the most of the strengths of each team member."

These statements, along with the two-in-one declaration which was last done when Goh Chok Tong was named Lee Kuan Yew's successor, and Ong Teng Cheong named Goh's deputy, also remind those who may have preferred a different PM-in-waiting that Singapore will continue to benefit from the contributions of all the alternative candidates in the now concluded leadership race.

How then do Mr Heng and Mr Chan complement each other? The first thing that strikes an observer is that it is in their leadership style.

Since the dynamics of Cabinet and party deliberations are never made public, we can only judge by what they have said and done since they entered politics in 2011.

In essence, it is clear that Mr Heng's strength is his belief in collaboration and the art of partnership. Mr Chan's is in his strategic approach to policy and political matters as well as a firm approach to change management in government.

In an age of uncertainty, it is ever more unreasonable to expect the government to be right in all things, at all times.

Singapore needs to hedge its bets in economic strategy, broaden yet customise its foreign policy approaches to maintain constructive relationships with external powers and find ways to spread the responsibility for improving social provision and inclusion across society, and do so fairly.

In the policy-making process, it has become all the more important to engage business, union and community leaders as well as citizens, who on their part are yearning to do so too.

However, it takes a special leader to be deemed sincere in engaging and collaborating with stakeholders. How does Mr Heng fit the bill?

Mr Heng said that he is a leader who is comfortable with suspending decision-making till he feels he has all the relevant policy input - presumably also from stakeholders - to do so. Minister in the Prime Minister's Office and PAP Central Executive Committee Member Ms Indranee Rajah corroborated this when she spoke to reporters at the press conference following the announcement.

While Mr Heng assured all that he will make decisions when the issue demands it, his track record indicates that he is willing to give authentic public engagement the time it needs.

In his first ministerial role at the Ministry of Education, he abolished league tables that ranked secondary schools and emphasised the role of values and socio-emotional development in the education system which meant that parents' participation was welcomed in the holistic education of their children.

He helmed "Our Singapore Conversation", a year-long public engagement initiative.

He then led another consultation process - the Committee on the Future Economy.

As Finance Minister, he has incentivised stakeholders to work together, such as through the Community Network for Seniors programme for social support and Industry Transformation Maps that pull together government, unions and trade associations to work towards business development.

The 4G leaders have signalled that they will support this collaborative approach of governance through their choice of Mr Heng.

Clearly the first platform on which to do this is within Cabinet – this leadership style will allow the other members to bring their strengths to the table for the country's benefit.

How then does Mr Chan complement Mr Heng?

We will recall that Mr Chan was an integral part of the 2012 re-organisation of two ministries into three to better manage policies across the community, youth, sports, arts, family, social development, communications and media spheres.

When he helmed the Ministry for Social and Family Development, his first full ministerial portfolio, Mr Chan introduced significant reform by creating Social Service Offices to provide effective last-mile delivery of social assistance.

The Partner Operator scheme for childcare he introduced - which meant a cap on fees in return for preferential rates for the use of their premises in housing estates - not only made the services affordable but sought to raise its quality as well.

When he was Secretary-General of the National Trades Union Congress, he put in motion the recent expansion of the Employment Act to protect the professional and managerial segments in the labour market.

Mr Chan has strategic vision, firm leadership and is comfortable leading swift and deep institutional change.

He identifies the critical goals for state action in areas where there are complex and diverse networks of players and restructures them for efficiency, as epitomised by his actions in social service, unions and grassroots activities.

In sum, one leader has a collaborative approach while the other sets clear strategic goals and drives government transformation resolutely to achieve them.

Mr Heng and Mr Chan will have to work hand in glove to prove to Singaporeans that they do get the policies right by getting the processes of governance right at the next general election. Depending on the outcome, an uneventful transfer of the mantle of leadership may follow.