

Heng Swee Keat enjoys working with everyone in the 4G leadership team

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Knowing the identity of the next Prime Minister is the question many Singaporeans are asking.

For those who are unfamiliar with the front-runners, it's still not too late to hear from one of contenders for the top job — Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat.

In fact, that's probably one of the reasons why most participants stayed till the final session of the day-long Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspectives conference on Jan 22 to hear him speak.

It was a homecoming of sorts for Heng, who returned after a two year absence from the conference, and he did his best to wow the crowd.

Departing from his usual style of reading a prepared script, Heng spoke off the cuff for half an hour before taking questions from the floor.

Here are three key takeaways from his answers at the Q and A segment.

1. His health is okay now

Heng recovered miraculously from a major stroke in 2016. Given the possibility of him taking over as the next PM, his health condition was one of those questions many people are curious about.

When asked by the moderator about his current health, Heng answered somewhat indirectly by first expressing his appreciation to the life-saving efforts of his cabinet colleagues and the medical team that attended to him.

He said his doctors were surprised by his stroke given his "low risk" profile and even went on to crack a joke from the police force, which he was once part of, about how "low risk doesn't mean no risk."

His meandering answer more or less sent out a subtle message: his health is okay now.

"So just take care of yourself and you know, just take care of the things you do. But I'm very glad that I'm back to work, I am doing a lot of things as I used to do, except that I take my exercise even more seriously now."

It was a long answer to a pretty straight forward question. But then again, it helped to a certain extent in answering doubts on whether his health permits him to take on heavier responsibilities.

2. Heng tells everyone what we already know – The 4G Ministers are a cohesive team

For Heng and his other cabinet colleagues, it's perhaps worth reiterating the point every time a question on 4G leadership is asked, in case anyone gets the wrong idea: This is a very *cohesive* team.

Bearing the image of a typical People's Action Party (PAP) politician, Heng displayed no traces of ambition in his answer when asked about his readiness to lead.

In his first remarks on the 4G leadership since the team of 16 ministers and office-holders issued a statement on leadership succession on Jan 4, he said he "really enjoy(s) working with them, everyone in the team", a sign that may be interpreted that he has broad-based support among his colleagues.

Otherwise, he gave nothing new away.

Again, it's all about the team.

"First of all on the 4G team and how we're working together, I must say that we're working together really well. It is a team of serious minded people who are trying to do their best, and I really enjoy working with them, everyone in the team. And I will say it's not just the 4G team, in fact it's the entire Cabinet. I mean PM sets a very, very good example. And it is a team that is very cohesive, I mean we discuss issues every week across a whole range of subjects, from security to social care, healthcare, to education to the economy. So it's a very serious-minded team."

Well, at the very least he did not say the issue is "over-discussed".

Hopefully his talking points can be refreshed, so we can all learn something new soon.

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3. Heng thinks Singapore needs leadership "not just at the political level"

It was quite clear in Heng's speech and answers that he is keen to harness the diverse strengths of Singaporeans in an age of greater complexity.

And it was a rare to hear Heng who seemed more at ease with policy issues most of the time, talk about politics .

"I'm very happy that Singaporeans believe that good political leadership is important for the country, and this is a great plus. There are many countries who really make fun of their leaders, make fun of their political leaders, and I don't think that is a healthy trend, because if leadership in the country is mocked at, where people have no respect, then I don't think the country can move in the same direction.

And in fact in many places, unfortunately, political contests has exacerbated that. So one group is very happy to make fun of the other group, sabotage the other group, I hope that we will never have a shutdown in our government because we can't agree, you know."

And his vision? People in leadership positions from all sectors of Singapore coming together to achieve something.

"I hope we can go beyond that, that each and every one of you in this room, in your leadership position, in the private sector, in the people sector, and in the government sector, can come together and say "What is it that we want to achieve together?" And how do we provide leadership, not just at the national political level, but at every level, in our companies, in our trade associations. How can our trade associations come together to work better, and in our social sector, and across social sectors, between economic sector and social sector."

Mmm, it's one of those things that make a lot of sense, but in Singapore where many expect the government to take the lead, ground-up solutions may not be obvious.

In recent years, Heng has become the go-to guy to head all kinds of committees.

With him potentially going on to become a key 4G leader, perhaps we can expect more national committees in future when he steps up.