

4G ministers are a serious-minded and cohesive team

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The Straits Times, 23 January 2018

The fourth-generation ministers are a "serious-minded" and cohesive group who try to do their best for Singapore, Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat said yesterday about the team he is tipped to lead as a contender for the prime minister's position.

"I really enjoy working with... everyone on the team," added Mr Heng, in his first remarks on leadership succession since the issue was put under the spotlight this year.

The topic, which Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong described as an urgent issue in a Facebook post on Dec 31, came up again yesterday at a conference.

Mr Heng was asked if he was ready to be Singapore's fourth prime minister during a question and answer session. He did not answer it directly, but said the crucial factor is for the fourth-generation ministers to work cohesively as a team to ensure Singapore thrives in this age of complexity.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has set a very good example on this front, he said, adding that the Cabinet gathers every week to discuss a whole range of topics that are of importance to the country.

The issue of leadership renewal has become more urgent since PM Lee has said repeatedly that he will step down after the next General Election, which is due by April 2021.

Besides Mr Heng, the two other front runners for the top job are Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Chan Chun Sing and Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills) Ong Ye Kung.

The trio plus 13 ministers and office-holders who form the fourth-generation team had said in a joint statement on Jan 4 that they were working closely to pick a leader among themselves.

It was in response to Mr Goh's post, in which he urged the team to pick a leader in six to nine months.

Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean also touched on the topic during the day-long Singapore Perspectives 2018 conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies. He said Singapore's leadership must not become aged, as a certain vitality and energy are needed to lead a country.

"You don't want a whole nation to be held hostage by the health of a cohort of people who are already senior, and getting more and more senior with each passing year, so you need leadership renewal," he said to a question on whether there should be more older ministers in the Cabinet to reflect the views of older Singaporeans in an ageing population.

He added that he hoped the younger ministers would see the benefit of having "more senior" members in Cabinet to ensure continuity.

Describing this as one of the unique features of Singapore's political system, he said former prime ministers have remained in Cabinet as senior ministers and minister mentor, and this had been a "great help" for younger ministers like himself in the past.

Founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew stayed on as senior minister after stepping aside, and was later made minister mentor.

Others had also held the post of senior minister, including Mr Goh as well as former deputy prime ministers S. Rajaratnam and S. Jayakumar.

On the interest in the subject of leadership renewal, Mr Heng said he was happy Singaporeans believed good political leadership was important for the country.

This was not the case in many countries, where people have lost confidence in their leaders and often mocked them, creating an environment that makes it hard to govern, he added.

Mr Heng also said good leaders are needed in all fields, including the social and economic sectors.

When asked about his health, as he had collapsed from a stroke in 2016 during a Cabinet meeting, he quipped: "I am very glad that I am back at work and doing a lot of things as I used to, except that I take my exercise even more seriously now."

He added that his doctors were surprised he had a stroke as he was deemed to be at low risk.

He quoted them a message oft-cited when he was in the police force earlier in his career: "Low risk doesn't mean no risk."