

# 11 . 4G AND THE 2 SHANS

*Singapore's fourth prime minister faces challenges not unlike Goh Chok Tong's.*

MORE EARNEST THAN magnetic, better at balancing budgets than rousing a crowd, Heng Swee Keat is unlikely to be saddled with unrealistic expectations when he becomes Singapore's fourth prime minister. Being underestimated can be a political asset. It was a step in Goh Chok Tong's ladder from a wooden technocrat to a popular leader. When Goh became prime minister in 1990, people regarded him as a seat-warmer for Lee Hsien Loong, and Lee Kuan Yew's second- or third-choice one at that. But rather than provoke scorn, this image evoked empathy, which Goh cultivated into affection and even respect.

In late 2018, Heng Swee Keat was anointed as Lee Hsien Loong's eventual successor in similarly unpropitious circumstances. Once again, this wasn't the incoming leader's fault: it had more to do with the public's doubts about the People's Action Party's (PAP) unconventional selection process, and rumours that his seniors may have preferred others to be in charge. Once again, a sceptical public may give the new leader the benefit of the doubt and warm to him, mindful that alternative scenarios could have been worse.

The main misgivings I've heard when political watchers compare Heng with his peers are that he takes too long listening to others' views, and too long expressing his own. These hardly sound like disqualifying flaws, in an era coarsened by contemptible politicians like Donald Trump, Boris Johnson and Jair Bolsonaro. Furthermore, it is not as if Heng is fundamentally different from others who were considered for the job. It was always going to be about continuity, not change. The next prime minister would come from the PAP, the only ruling party Singapore has known since it became self-governing in 1959. And, whomever the party picked to lead, he would preserve

the PAP's pro-business-but-socially-responsive philosophy, and its security-focused state apparatus with a dominant executive at its core. In the larger scheme of things, the career technocrats who made it to the final rounds were just different shades of white.

Still, the curiosity about this round of PAP leadership succession was understandable. It would be the prelude to only the third change of prime minister in 60 years. And, there was more uncertainty this time than ever before. When Lee Kuan Yew stepped aside for Goh Chok Tong in 1990, the event was met with more disbelief than anticipation: it was assumed that the nation's patriarch would still be pulling the strings (Chapter 5). As for the identity of the third occupant of the Prime Minister's Office, the writing was on the wall even before Goh moved in. When Lee Hsien Loong took over in 2004, the only surprise was that Goh lasted as long as he did.

PAP leadership transitions have thus been associated with surprise-free long-term planning. Indeed, starting with Lee Kuan Yew in the early 1980s, leaders have identified methodical party rejuvenation as a top national priority. Lee Hsien Loong and his colleagues carried on the tradition. At every general election, they introduced new PAP candidates as young men and women who had been talent-spotted to take over leadership positions; the public now had a responsibility to elect these promising individuals and secure Singapore's future. In almost all cases, voters obliged. Having kept their end of the bargain, Singaporeans were justifiably unimpressed by the government's slow progress in delivering a strong fourth generation of leaders.

The delay was partly due to a lack of consensus within the PAP about who should be the 4G's first among equals. The waiting game got so awkward that *The Straits Times* felt the need to propose a "neat solution". Lee should eat his words and serve beyond the age of 70, one of its editors opined: "It gives enough time for the changing of the guard to happen smoothly and uneventfully." For a while, it looked like the main candidates were Heng, in his late 50s, and two ministers eight years his junior, Chan Chun Sing and Ong Ye Kung. The establishment's worst kept secret of 2018 was that

the prime minister and his kitchen cabinet favoured Chan, but that there were objections to the former army chief both among his 4G peers and the party's 2,000-odd cadre members. At the PAP's biennial conference in November 2018, cadres signalled that they weren't on the same page as their top leaders. They elected Ong into the central executive committee, even though he wasn't on the outgoing CEC's recommended list. More importantly, cadres gave Heng more votes than Chan, making the finance minister the most acceptable choice. None of this need alarm Singaporeans. It would have been more troubling if the 4G lacked more than one person able and willing to lead, or if the establishment spoke with one voice. We may have grown accustomed to contest-free leadership transitions within the PAP, but that didn't make them normal or healthy.

Reacting to the lack of openness and transparency in the establishment's internal workings, Singaporeans grumbled that they were not being given a say in the choice of their next prime minister. The complaint was new even though the process wasn't, indicating that public expectations had changed. In 1990, when Goh's team took over, less than one in ten resident adults had a degree or diploma; six in ten didn't have secondary qualifications. Today, almost half have degrees or diplomas; only one-quarter didn't complete secondary school. Even if they don't possess top qualifications themselves, many Singaporeans have had work experience in globally exposed sectors and have some sense of what strong organisations, managers and leaders look like. Back in 1990, the PAP could impress most Singaporeans by reciting a high-achiever's CV. Today's citizens need more evidence before they're convinced of a leader's worth.

Granted, the complaints about feeling disenfranchised were partly born of political illiteracy. In Singapore's Westminster-style parliamentary democracy, unlike in presidential systems, citizens are not entitled to choose the head of government directly. Like in Britain, Australia, India and Malaysia, voters in Singapore elect members of parliament, but it's the winning parties that decide who becomes premier. For example, when Congress leader Sonia Gandhi led an opposition alliance to victory in India's 2004 elections,

she unexpectedly turned down the premiership and passed it to Manmohan Singh—an Oxford PhD economist so low-key, he'd make Heng Swee Keat look like a rock star. In such systems, it is not uncommon for a ruling party, after internal wrangling, to suddenly declare a new prime minister in mid-term. As this book goes to press, Malaysia is in the throes of such a change. In the 2010s, four out of five Australian premiers entered the office this way.

In Singapore, though, citizens are even more excluded from the process. This is due to the lack of democracy within the ruling party. Lee Kuan Yew gave the PAP a Leninist structure, ensuring that its summit could never be conquered from the base. The central executive committee, via cadres it selects, basically elects itself. It would be futile for any leadership contender to appeal to the party grassroots, let alone the wider public. Popularity among the masses does not decide succession. It may even work against candidates, since the government's elite technocrats would probably be suspicious of any charismatic colleague cultivating too independent a connection with the citizenry.

On the plus side, this model protects Singapore from the kind of demagogues that occasionally emerge through presidential systems. On the other hand, the lack of any clear mechanism for a more robust leadership contest means that contenders for the top job are never really market-tested. In effect, this system puts Singapore's political future in the hands of a very small coterie of men and women—the prime minister and a handful of his confidants. Other ministers, MPs and cadres could exercise some veto power, if they find the chosen one highly objectionable. And, according to the official line, the prime minister leaves the final choice to the next generation's office holders. But these caveats belie the reality that current leaders vet the finalists. Anyone whom party seniors deem unfit to succeed them would have been weeded out long before the final rounds. It is probable that there are a few Singaporeans of prime ministerial potential languishing in the civil service or flourishing in the private sector, and whom the PAP have never considered for political office because they are too different from the norm.

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One consequence of this carefully controlled, top-down process is that an incoming prime minister must work hard to prove he is his own man. Everyone knows he doesn't owe his position to the grassroots, but to a handful of his peers and an even tighter circle of elders. Adding to the next prime minister's challenge is that, going by PAP tradition, 4G won't be a clean break from 3G. LKY straddled both of the previous handovers simply because he was LKY. Goh Chok Tong, too, stayed in government when 3G took over. At the time, it seemed like the obvious thing to do. If the first PM still had a seat at the cabinet table, why shouldn't the second? What started out as a way to accommodate the one-off phenomenon that was Lee Kuan Yew has now become convention, such that it would be unthinkable for Heng to clear the 3G cache and hit the refresh button.

Supporting the tradition of continuity is that famous 1988 Lee Kuan Yew quote: "And even from my sickbed, even if you are going to lower me into the grave and I feel that something is going wrong, I will get up. Those who believe that when I have left the government as prime minister, that I have gone into permanent retirement, really should have their heads examined." As a pledge of undying dedication to the cause, it couldn't have been clearer. But as an unconditional vote of confidence in his successors, it left something to be desired. What's often overlooked, though, is another important LKY precedent: the lengths to which he went to show that he trusted Goh and his peers. Lee thrust key portfolios into his juniors' hands several years before the official handover. These included the powerful security ministries: by the time the New Guard took over in 1991, its ministers had held the defence portfolio for nine years and the home affairs portfolio for six years. Foreign affairs had been delegated to the New Guard 11 years before 1991.

In comparison, the current transition is well behind schedule. However much the Lee Hsien Loong Government tries to talk up 4G ministers, its apportionment of duties in recent years tells its own story. Leaving aside formal ministerial appointments, everybody knows that when public sector systems break down, the Mr Fix-it

on the prime minister's speed dial is a man from his first cabinet, Khaw Boon Wan. And when there are political fires to put out—or pre-empt—it's been another senior steward, K. Shanmugam, whom the government still counts on. Whatever others think of the job they've done, it's clear from the responsibilities they've shouldered that Khaw and Shanmugam are the PAP's MVPs.

Shanmugam's central role is particularly intriguing. The government has always had hardline enforcers like Wong Kan Seng and Teo Chee Hean. Shanmugam has brought something else to the table, which cabinet had been missing for more than a decade. When Lee Kuan Yew stopped involving himself in the day-to-day business of government, the team lost its chief politico-legal strategist. For decades, his colleagues had relied on Lee to strengthen the government's hand through audacious legal and constitutional innovations such as the Newspaper Printing Presses Act of 1974, the GRC system of 1988 and the ministerial pay formula of 1994, to name a few. When LKY faded from the scene, it looked as if the PAP would never again have someone with the legal mind, shrewd instincts or street-fighter temperament to replicate his bold interventions—until now.

Shanmugam's Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act 2019 (Pofma), for example, is Singapore's most sweeping media legislation since LKY's 1986 press law amendments, which empowered the government to limit the circulation of foreign periodicals that did not give it the unedited right of reply. It used these powers regularly in the 1980s and '90s, against publications such as *Time*, *The Economist* and *The Wall Street Journal*. The right-of-reply weapon fell into disuse as news media went online. It looked as if the law could not be retrofitted for the digital age, but Shanmugam found a way to revive it through Pofma (Chapter 21). Like many of Lee's legislative creations, Pofma is globally unprecedented. Similarly, post-LKY, nobody other than Shan, as his fellow lawyers used to call him, could have pushed through the Constitutional amendments to reserve Presidential Elections for minority candidates (Chapter 9).

Shan means mountain in Chinese, and the fundamentals of

fengshui say you must build your house to face water, but leaning against the mountain. As prime minister, Heng may benefit from leaning on Shan. But just like Goh Chok Tong in the 1990s, he would need to make sure he's not lost in the mountain's shadow.

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Meanwhile, as the PAP heads towards its 4G future, another mountain is disappearing over the receding horizon. In 2019, Tharman Shanmugaratnam, 62, received the dubious distinction of becoming the youngest minister ever to be transferred to the pre-retirement position of senior minister. If an ascendant Shanmugam reassures the PAP by reviving its past aura of invincibility, a waning Tharman represents its rejection of a reformist future that could have been.

Tharman, who held the education and finance portfolios with distinction, is Singapore's most highly regarded leader. More than any other minister, he inspires confidence and trust from people across the political spectrum. Lee Kuan Yew's death may have contributed to the PAP's impressive recovery between the 2011 and 2015 general elections, but no living leader did as much as Tharman to strengthen the party's fundamentals. He drove groundbreaking social policies to ease the burden on households, like the Silver Support scheme, Medishield Life and the Pioneer Generation medical package. It could not have been coincidence that Tharman's team in Jurong GRC scored the PAP's biggest winning margin in 2015. Nationally, the PAP's share of the popular vote was 69.9 per cent. In Tharman's Jurong, it hit 79.3 per cent.

Any election result provides more than just a mandate to the victorious party. It also generates political capital for various individuals and groups within the party. The capital from GE2015's 10-point swing towards the PAP was there for Tharman's and other reformers' taking. They deserved it. Inexplicably, his stock within the government fell soon after. Perhaps this was an indicator of his main weakness: like many wise leaders, he was not a wily enough politician.

According to conventional wisdom, Tharman is not 4G, and too close to Lee Hsien Loong's age to tick the rejuvenation box. But, they are five years apart, the equivalent of a full parliamentary term. Logically, whenever Lee chooses to step down, Tharman could serve a full five-year term and then hand over to a 4G successor, without retiring at an older age than Lee before him.

The main publicly stated objection, though, concerns Tharman's race. Detractors claim Singapore is not ready for a non-Chinese premier; Tharman is of Ceylonese Tamil ancestry in a country that is 70 per cent Chinese. There's no doubt that racial prejudices persist. But no matter how racist Chinese Singaporeans may be towards minorities in general, there is no evidence that such attitudes significantly handicap Tharman's effectiveness in rallying them. On the contrary, election and survey results show that even after subtracting points for not being Chinese, Tharman's approval ratings shame neither him nor the ethnic Chinese public. If they embarrass anyone, it's the cabinet colleagues he outperforms. The official reason for Tharman's disqualification makes as much sense as preventing Lionel Messi from spearheading the Barcelona team despite his performance and popularity, just because he's too short—only 1.7 metres, compared with what pundits say is the footballer's ideal height of 1.85 metres.

The real issue with Tharman may be the colour of his politics, and not his skin—more than any other minister, he has an appetite for progressive reforms. But that's what makes him the man for these times. Throughout the developed world, what's needed is social protection and redistribution to meet the growing mass experience of economic insecurity, inequality and stagnation. Neoliberalism is wearing thin. Citizens across the developed world are rebelling against elites and expertise, and finding false hope in identity politics. Polarised politics is preventing publics from working for the common good. Populist promises are drowning out sensible solutions to complex problems.

While this historic inflection point has overwhelmed many able leaders throughout the world, Tharman is uniquely equipped to guide Singapore through it. He is a world-class policy wonk who also



happens to be extremely popular. He has won over the public, not with empty rhetoric or simplistic solutions, but through his palpable sincerity in wanting to build a country where people are treated with dignity and met at the point of their need, whether those needs are economic or more intangible.

Tharman's sidelining showed just how resistant the PAP is to reform. Lee Hsien Loong has paid lip service to the need to think outside of the box and slaughter sacred cows, but his administration's overriding instinct has been to preserve the status quo (Chapter 34). Tharman was a rare exception, and evidently could not tip the balance in cabinet in favour of progressive change. That's no wonder, because the PAP's leadership selection system, built to ensure cohesion, also promotes intellectual inbreeding. Divergent views will always contain an implicit criticism of the legacy that the incumbents want to pass on, so a top-down leadership succession system tends to penalise candidates prepared to engage in a radical reassessment of the country's direction. At a time when even Singaporeans close to the establishment understand the need for fresh thinking, the process has a strong bias in favour of conservatism.

Of all the uncertainties circling around Heng's 4G team as it prepares to take charge, the counterfactual "what ifs" are the one that will be hardest to dispel. What if there had been a much more open debate within the party, government and country about Singapore's future direction and its choice of leaders? What if 4G wasn't compelled to work from the deadening and dogmatic default setting of the status quo? What if Tharman had been given the chance, whether or not from the number one position, to finish what he started? We will never know; so while Heng Swee Keat cannot lose a debate that never occurred, he cannot win it either. You have to feel for him.

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Insights into the 2018 selection process are drawn from: P. N. Balji, "How Heng Swee Keat Can Return the Favour to PAP Cadres", Yahoo News Singapore, November 25, 2018; and Faris Mokhtar, "Ong Ye Kung out of PM Race, Say PAP Cadres", TODAYonline, November 12, 2018.