

The Leader of the 4G (fourth generation) in Singapore

Posted on



Panel: Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (center), Khaw Boon Wan (left) and Minister Lawrence Wong (right).

PM Lee Hsien Loong: We are holding this press conference so that you have a chance to talk to us, ask some questions. You know the story – I asked Mr. Khaw Boon Wan to facilitate the process to have the 4G come to a consensus on a leader for the team and they have elected Lawrence Wong and it has been endorsed by the Ministers, as well as the PAP MPs. So today I have Mr. Khaw and Lawrence here to tell you how it has happened and also to answer some of the questions.

Mr. Khaw Boon Wan: PM asked me to oversee the process of finding a successor to PM, by taking soundings individually among the Cabinet Ministers, the Speaker and Sec Gen NTUC, excluding PM and the two SMs, and facilitate a consensus outcome.

He stressed that we approach this choice in the right spirit. We are trying to make a very consequential choice – who will be best able to unite the team, make the most of the different strengths of the ministers, provide the leadership to both the team and to Singapore, and give ourselves the best chance of continuing to succeed.

PM told me that my task was not only to ascertain who has the strongest support from the Ministers, but to do so in such a way as to foster a consensus and bring the team together. I therefore took a team-building approach, to facilitate forthright and candid discussions of each potential candidate's strengths and weaknesses. Our over-riding objective is to promote unity and to ensure a strong 4G Team to lead Singapore forward.

After the Budget and COS, I interviewed the stakeholders individually for their views on their preferred choice, other than themselves, and asked them to rank the potential candidates in order of their preference. At each interview, I took the stakeholders through the key political leadership attributes to encourage them to make a considered and dispassionate decision.

The stakeholders were candid in their assessments. They were emphatic in wanting to pick the candidate with unquestionable commitment to Singapore, who inspires trust both from Singaporeans and among his team of office holders and MPs, who has the backs of his colleagues and is most able to unite them to serve the nation. These are character attributes, which are hard to measure, and yet crucial in ensuring the success of the team and thus of Singapore. Assessing them requires the stakeholders' judgment and insights through years of working closely together.

To the question "Who will they choose as their leader based on their overall assessment, bearing in mind the need for the leader to bring others together, and to win elections?", 15 of the 19 stakeholders chose Minister Lawrence Wong as their preferred leader.

This is an over-whelming majority of 79%, way above the traditional super majority benchmark of two-thirds. I reported this finding to the Ministers and the PAP MPs on Thursday and they all collectively endorsed the choice of Minister Lawrence Wong as the leader of the 4G Team.

Minister Lawrence Wong: Throughout my life, I have never hankered for post, position or power. I have always been realistic about my own abilities and strengths. My philosophy in life, instilled by my parents from young - is that whatever task I am assigned, I will give of my best. If my best falls short - as it surely will from time to time - I try to learn, and I strive to improve, and do better. So I have never gone out looking for additional work, but somehow the work finds me. Over the last 25 years in public service, my duties and responsibilities have kept on growing. It is like what happened more than two years ago when I was in MND, and DPM called me out of the blue. He asked, have you heard about the virus in Wuhan, and before I knew it, I was co-chairing the MTF Taskforce with Gan Kim Yong.

Now I will be taking on what would possibly be the biggest responsibility of my life. I am under no illusions about the demands of the job. It will get more challenging with greater political contestation and a growing desire for diversity in Parliament. And as PM said in Parliament recently, we do not assume that the PAP will win the next general election. Every GE from now on will be about which party will form the Government – not just how many seats the opposition wins, or what percentage of the votes the ruling party gets.

Knowing full well that we will have to earn the right to leadership, I will continue with the same principles that have guided me all these years, which is to give of my best, to engage and listen, and to learn and improve continually. As I have repeatedly emphasised, leadership and political leadership is never about one person. It has always been about the entire team. Even a giant like Mr. Lee Kuan Yew had a team. The same was true for Mr. Goh Chok Tong and now PM Lee – he has SM Teo, SM Tharman and many others.

So much more the case will be with me, I need each and every one of the 4G team – the Ministers, the SMSs, the MOSs, the Parliament Secretaries and the MPs. As a team that has worked together to fight COVID these past two years, we have gelled and grown closer, together as a team. I believe we have strengthened our bonds with Singaporeans too, through this crisis of a generation, and the bonds among Singaporeans have also been strengthened by the crisis. In some societies, the crisis depleted social capital and weakened political trust. In Singapore, I think we have dealt with the crisis in such a way as to add to our social capital and strengthen political trust, and I am very grateful for that. But beyond this crisis, there will be many more challenges ahead of us, especially as we enter a more complex, volatile and unpredictable world. We need to get through this epidemic and the pressing economic challenges we are facing today. And we must work hard to build a better Singapore tomorrow. We can overcome all of these challenges only as a strong and united team with a single-minded focus to serve Singapore and Singaporeans. And that is why I value the contributions from everyone on the team, including our broader team of hardworking and dedicated party activists.

I look forward to bringing in more people to join our cause to contribute in different ways and help strengthen our team. And of course, I will continue to benefit from the advice and guidance of our seniors, especially PM and our two SMs. I look forward to working closely with everyone to take the PAP and Singapore forward and to earn the trust and support of each and every Singaporean.

I am very grateful for the trust and support the Prime Minister and team have given me. Being a fourth-generation team leader is an important responsibility, and I will definitely do my best to do this job well. We will also uphold our beliefs along the way and do our best to

do our best. I know that every group and every class of Chinese people have different experiences and expectations, so we will continue to listen to everyone's opinions and continue to learn and improve.

Since its founding, Singapore's political leadership has emphasized teams rather than individuals. In the past two years, the fourth-generation leaders fought the epidemic together and established a very good tacit understanding and stronger cohesion. Next, we will serve the country and the people wholeheartedly, and make a difference for Singapore and Singaporeans contribute. There are still many challenges ahead of us, but I believe that as long as the government and the people are united, we can definitely overcome obstacles and build a better future for Singapore.

Finally, I look forward to working closely with you all to lead Singapore forward and will also strive to win people's trust and support. Thanks.

Question and Answer

Lianhe Zaobao: The history of the founding of our country is only more than 50 years old, and the leadership is ready to change only two or three times. We refer to the previous example that the main ministers of the same generation will coordinate and select their peers. This time you have entrusted the outgoing Minister Xu Wenyan to facilitate such a consensus, and you have consulted not only the same generation of ministers, but all the other cabinet ministers. What motivated you to make such a change? The result of coordination is that the overwhelming majority of respondents choose to be consistent. What do you think about this result?

PM Lee: The succession of leaders in any organization or team must be handled carefully. At the end of last year, the anti-epidemic work progressed smoothly, and the epidemic began to stabilize. I just reminded you that the process of selecting leaders for the fourth generation cannot be delayed indefinitely. I discussed with several ministers how we should handle this. Who will lead the fourth generation of Singapore's leadership team deserves our careful consideration. This leader must be able to lead Singapore and have the ability to cohere a team, so that the members of the team can complement each other, give full play to their strengths, and jointly manage the country well. At the same time, leaders must also be able to lead the people to work together for the future of Singapore and overcome all difficulties. After I consulted with several ministers, we came to this conclusion. Trusted senior leaders in the party meet with ministers individually and listen to everyone's opinions. They can share their views, concerns, and candidates in mind more candidly and with confidence. The method will be more stable and in-depth, and the elected leaders will

better reflect everyone's truest choice.

Therefore, I entrusted Xu Wenyan to meet with every cabinet minister except the two senior ministers and me to handle this matter. So not all the ministers, I and the two senior ministers were not involved in the process. Xu Wenyan is the former chairman of the DAP. He knows every cabinet member and has won everyone's trust. So he is best suited for this task. I told Xu Wenyan that his task was to help ministers reach a consensus and clearly choose a leader and encourage the fourth-generation leadership team to think carefully and make decisions that are objective, rational, and consider the overall situation. And, in the process, bring the leadership team closer together. Therefore, after the budget was passed in March this year, Xu Wenyan began to meet with ministers.

After my visit to the United States, Xu Wenyan reported to me that the team had reached a broad consensus and agreed with the candidates in mind. Xu Wenyan then reported his conclusions to the ministers, and the ministers unanimously agreed. All members of the People's Action Party are also very supportive, expressing that Huang Xuncai is their choice. The successor thing is finally settled. I am very satisfied with the process. I am very grateful to Xu Wenyan for helping us accomplish this important task. I'm glad too Ministers and MPs clearly affirmed Huang Xuncai's performance and personality and unanimously elected him as their leader. I am confident that the fourth generation team led by Huang Xuncai will be able to lead Singapore to overcome all difficulties and bring more well-being to the people of the country. So I call on everyone to give full support to Huang Xuncai and his team.

ZB: It has been almost a tradition for the next generation's leaders to choose the first among equals by themselves. This time round, you asked a senior ex-Minister, Mr Khaw Boon Wan to organise the process. Why Mr Khaw?

PM Lee: I was summarising in the response, the process and the history leading us to this point over the last few months – How we made the decision on the process, how we unfold it and the outcome in my assessment. Yong May's other question is why we asked somebody to mediate the process this time. I think that fundamentally we are looking to bring everybody together and reach a choice of a new leader in a way which fosters consensus and trust and helps a new leader to consolidate his standing and build his team and build his ability to lead Singapore forward.

In the previous occasions, we have done it in various ways. With Mr Goh Chok Tong, a small group of us met after the 1984 elections. There was about four, five or six Ministers at most, and very informally and made the decision. In the case of myself, Mr Wong Kan Seng

chaired the group of Ministers, hosted lunch and we settled it over lunch. I was very moved that everybody felt that it was a straightforward matter, and then we came to a conclusion very quickly.

This is the third time we are doing it. Last year, Mr. Heng Swee Keat, after having been selected, decided to step aside. The Ministers told me that they needed a bit more time in order to settle the matter. So, I said, "yes, let us get COVID-19 done first." After COVID-19 was coming under control, I decided that this thing cannot wait. I mean that time is passing, we have to settle the matter, the uncertainty is not good. So last year towards the end of the year, I told the Ministers and I said at the Party convention that, now that COVID-19 is coming under control, we have to deal with this.

And we discussed with some of the Ministers, what would be a good way to do it and to do it in a more systematic and thorough way which encourages candour, introspection and objectivity, yet without impairing mutual relationship and trust amongst the team. People must be able to speak honestly to express their views of the strengths and weaknesses of the different potential candidates and speak frankly; What do they worry about? What do they feel comfortable about? Whom they would like to support? But do it in such a way that the views can be put together.

If there are different views and different concerns, then their concerns can be surfaced without it being personalised - an "I like you" and "I do not like you" matter. And then people can think it over again, and maybe reconsider their conclusion, but we want you to be in a collected, dispassionate, almost Zen state of mind, when you said I think for Singapore, this is the best choice, putting aside personal preferences, ambitions and biases.

We felt that a more systematic way of doing this rather than all sit down, and then we nod our heads politely, is to have a process, and we concluded that Mr. Khaw Boon Wan is the best person to lead the process.

I spoke to Mr. Khaw Boon Wan to ask him to take on this responsibility. He listened to it, he knew it was something which he could not decline to do because it is a very heavy responsibility, and he thought over how he would approach this process and spoke to each one of the stakeholders individually. The stakeholders meaning the ministers, excluding me and the two senior ministers, and including Ng Chee Meng, NTUC and Tan Chuan-Jin, Speaker. Ng Chee Meng because NTUC is important and he was involved in the previous decision which settled on Mr. Heng Swee Keat, and Tan Chuan- Jin because he also was involved in the previous decision and is now Speaker.

The process proceeded after the Budget, and took about a month and it has brought us here today. It is a different way of doing it, it worked, next time we will have to see whether we will do it this way or if we can improve it further. We will take it one step at a time, and it has worked well for us.

The Straits Times: Question for Prime Minister, you have been saying for some time that you have wanted to have the political succession process settled by the time you turn 70, and now that we have gotten the process back on track, perhaps you can tell us what in your mind the timeline for transition looks like? Specifically, do you see the handover happening before the General Election so that the team seeks its own mandate, or do you see yourself leading the PAP team into the next Election?

PM Lee: We will do this carefully and deliberately. I am already 70 and I am looking forward to handing over to Lawrence once he is ready. This settling of the succession, we have already taken, is a very important step in leadership renewal. One factor to take into account when to do the transition will be the next General Election which will be due by 2025. I will discuss with Lawrence, and we will decide later what the best strategy is for us to fight the next General Election – whether it is for me to hand over to him first, he consolidates, he leads into the next election as leader of the 4G team and will be in charge after the next election; or I go into the next election leading the PAP, fight the next election, and if we win, after that Lawrence takes over, and then the 4G team goes forward.

It will depend on how things evolve and is something which we will decide later on. Either way, our plan is for Lawrence to be the next PM, if the PAP wins the next GE. That has been settled, and the reaction from the public over the last two days shows many people are happy that we have taken this decision, and are happy with the decision.

CNA: PM, you spoke a bit about the selection process and how it has been different from ESM Goh, and yourself. Can I take us back to the selection for DPM Heng Swee Keat when he was chosen. At that point in time, a broader consensus was sought, the SMSes, the MOSes were all drawn into the process. Can you walk us through why this time round you chose to keep it to just the Cabinet, the full ministers and not involve the larger group?

PM Lee: Essentially, the key team for the Prime Minister is his Cabinet. You will have tighter core groups within the Cabinet who work most closely with the Prime Minister, but the Cabinet as a whole is the Prime Minister's governing team, and the Prime Minister is in the Cabinet, the primus inter pares. He is first amongst equals, they have collective responsibility for governing Singapore, which means that the Prime Minister must have the full support of his peers in Cabinet, because otherwise the Government cannot function.

I explained to you how with the 2G ministers, basically a small group of ministers, who made the decision with the 2G's succession. With the 3G's succession, it was a bit bigger group of Ministers, but it was not all the Ministers who made the decision. With the 4G, with Mr. Heng Swee Keat, Mr. Heng decided to go for a more inclusive process and after the Ministers had decided on him, he wanted to talk to the MOSes and other office holders as well to get their support before going to the caucus of MPs. But, in our case, we did the Ministers, because that is the group which has collective responsibility. After the Ministers, we went to the MPs, including the Ministers of State and the Parliamentary Secretaries and the other office holders, and they also supported the choice. And of course, I and the two Senior Ministers have also strongly supported the choice. So, I think it is a variation in process, but the essential thing is, the Prime Minister and his Cabinet Ministers must have absolute trust and confidence in one another and must support one another - support the leader, support the team, work together and they are one. It is not that in many countries. The form is the same, but the actual workings of it are very exciting. I think in Singapore, the more we can maintain the way we have done things in Cabinet, I think, the better it is for Singapore.

Berita Harian: Good morning, PM. I have a question for Mr. Khaw. Would you be able to share the details into how the voting process results come in and in terms of the ranking for the respective Ministers? Thank you.

Mr Khaw: Thank you Sa'at, also, selamat berpuasa. As you have heard, I asked the stakeholders to name their choices, other than themselves, and to rank them. 15 of the 19 stakeholders chose Lawrence as their preferred leader. None of the other names garnered more than two votes. The interviews were carried over three weeks. Each interview took up to an hour. The stakeholders were very candid and in turn, I assured them of full confidentiality. Only overall results and anonymised findings were shared, and even then, on an 'as needed' basis. Now that we have a clear outcome, there is really no need for me to discuss who was the second or the third choice. Suffice to say that Lawrence was the first choice of an overwhelming majority. When I reported and presented these findings to Cabinet on Thursday, all collectively endorsed the decision to have Lawrence Wong lead the 4G team, as did the PAP MPs at the party caucus later on.

Channel 8 News: I have a question for Minister Lawrence Wong. I would like to hear your thoughts and views on the 4G team. How is the team working together, especially for the past one year? What are their strengths and weaknesses? Thank you.

Minister Wong: Thank you. Leadership is fundamentally about the team. Everyone in the team brings with them their unique capabilities and strengths. For example, some of us in

the team come from the public sector, and we have more exposure with regard to policy work. Others come from the private sector and they contribute different perspective and ideas. I value this diversity in our team greatly. You see this not just in the 4G team but also in our team of elected MPs. They have their own constituencies, but they champion a range of important causes and issues. So, collectively, we have a strong team and I will continue to work on strengthening the team.

Amidst this diversity, in the end, it is about all of us working together – as Chim Kang you have rightly said – reinforcing and supporting one another as a team. It is never about one person. It is about what we can deliver together as a team. The good thing is that we have been working more closely together, especially over the past two years. But in fact, many of us have been working together for more than a decade in politics. Whether it is on party matters, on the SG Green plan, on Women’s Development or on COVID-19, we have come to know one another’s strengths better, grow our confidence and trust in each other, and understand better how we can complement each other. As leader of the team, I will do my best to ensure that the contribution from the entire team will be greater than the sum of the individual parts. That is how the team must work – that we synergise, and the overall contribution is greater than just the adding up of each individual contribution. And as I said just now about my own philosophy, where fall short, we will strive to learn and improve and keep on doing better. This is what Singaporeans can expect from me and my team – that collectively we will always do our best for our people and our nation.

Tamil Murasu: Good morning Prime Minister Lee, Mr. Khaw and Minister Wong. This question is to the PM. Previously, when Mr. Heng Swee Keat was chosen to lead the 4G team, Mr. Chan Chun Sing was chosen as his deputy. This time round, will there be a deputy later or will he be chosen?

PM Lee: We have done it different ways. In the case of Mr. Goh Chok Tong and the 2G, we had Mr. Goh Chok Tong as 1DPM, clearly identified as the successor and at the same time supported by Mr. Ong Teng Cheong who was second DPM. In my case, the ministers settled on me, and later on, I appointed the Deputy Prime Ministers, a series of them. In the case of Mr. Heng Swee Keat and Mr. Chan Chun Sing, on that occasion, the ministers who caucus, who were involved, thought that they wanted to have a pairing and that would be the best choice. In this case, the exercise was to choose the leader of the 4G team – it was not to choose his deputy, it was not to choose a 5G leader. Therefore, there was no decision made on the deputy. And in due course, Lawrence will decide who will be his deputy and who will be in his core team. I hope he and his colleagues will work hard to identify and induct more promising leaders into the team to build up the 5G team for Singapore. In choosing a leader, we are always looking for somebody who can bring the team together, to get the best out of

each team member. Especially this time, I advise the ministers that this should be a major consideration in choosing the next leader. The world is getting more complicated, our challenges are getting greater and more multifarious. Our internal politics is also evolving. And you must maximise the abilities and the experiences and the instincts of people from a wide range of backgrounds and get them to work together so that you have an outstanding result which no single person can deliver.

It has always been like that, but much more so now. Even with Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, he had a core team of ministers who helped him achieve many of the things which Singapore did - Dr. Goh Keng Swee, Mr. Rajaratnam and Mr. Lim Kim San. Without them, much less would have been done. Mr. Goh Chok Tong had a strong team too, and I have greatly benefited from my Ministers in cabinet. I think it will be even more so with Lawrence. Lawrence has already emphasised the importance of teamwork amongst the ministers. To be effective as a PM, he must be able to trust and rely on his Ministers, and his Ministers must also be team players - supporting the PM, their PM, and supporting the team. And they all have to help the team to score goals collectively for Singapore. So, if it means passing the ball to somebody else who can head it in, you must be willing to do that. That is how the team has to work. And that is how Singapore Cabinets have worked and been able to deliver results. As I noted just now in passing, that is not how all other Cabinets in the world work. The rivalries and internal politics that you read about and occupy the political pages of their newspapers and make it even into our newspapers. These destructive dynamics, all these years we have avoided them and that has been a very important factor in the PAP's success and in Singapore's success. For Singapore's sake, we must ensure that the PAP government always continues to work like this.

ST: It is a follow up question for Minister Wong. You have spoken about building on the work of the 4G team which you have already been doing for the past few years. Could you say a bit about what you see as some of the challenges or priorities that the 4G will have to address - to address the concerns and the aspirations of the younger generation of Singaporeans?

Minister Wong: Thank you for the question, Warren. As ESM said in this Facebook post, I think we have our work cut out for us. There are many challenges ahead of us. There are some more pressing and immediate ones - the pandemic is not over, we have to get through it. There are considerable economic challenges to tackle arising from the war in Ukraine, not least the threat of higher and more persistent inflation and weaker growth. But beyond these immediate issues, we also need to look over the horizon. There are going to be more challenges in the coming years as we enter this new, uncertain volatile environment. I spoke about them in the Budget this year and I shared how we have to work hard, to better

position Singapore for this post-pandemic future. In the Budget, I said that the measures we are taking this year Budget are a first step in the multi-year plan to renew and strengthen our social compact for this new future. So I have been discussing with other 4G Ministers – even before this process – because in preparing for the Budget we have already been discussing these issues and we have some ideas on what additional steps we might want to take. We do intend to engage the public later on and comprehensively review our policies to see what needs to be adjusted and improved. This will be a major agenda for the 4G team. But beyond that, we will, as a team, continue to work hard to win the trust and support of every Singaporean – to create bonds and connect with them and to develop new ideas that will resonate with Singaporeans and especially with a new generation of Singaporeans. I fully recognise the growing diversity of experiences and perspectives amongst Singaporeans. I would like every Singaporean to know and feel that they will always have a stake in our society, even as we chart our new way forward together. As the leader of the team, that will be the approach, the attitude, and the spirit I adopt. Thank you.

CNA: My question is for Minister Lawrence. PM described how when he was selected, he was a unanimous choice of his peers. In your case it has been an overwhelming majority. Do you feel any pressure of bringing the team together, given that four of the group did not pick you as leader? Beyond that, for the broader electorate, do you feel that, as you start writing the next chapter of the Singapore story, you need to seek a mandate from the people sooner rather than later, perhaps? Is there a timeframe to that? Are we looking at a General Election one year from now?

Minister Wong: I understand why you are asking the question. On the first part of the question, while it is an overwhelming majority in the first instance as Boon Wan mentioned just now when this was presented both to the Cabinet and the Caucus, everyone unanimously at that stage agreed and supported the choice. In that regard, I do not feel the pressure.

As I had said, I am humbled and grateful for the support that everyone has given to me. But I am also fully aware that the mandate ultimately comes from the people and I do not take that for granted. We all know by when the next GE must be held. PM just talked about this just now. In due course, we will discuss, we will work out our strategy to fight the GE, and we will work hard to fight for the privilege to serve the people of Singapore in Government.

But for now, I will need time to consolidate, to discuss with the team to see what next steps we might take. How we would like to organise ourselves to tackle all the pressing challenges that I mentioned just now. I am fully aware that PM would like to handover to me as soon as I am ready. He has said this to you. He has said this to me more than once. I will

bear that in mind as I embark on my new responsibilities. I would say that this is also the value of our approach to leadership succession, which is that when we seek to renew the mandate, we do so with the strongest possible team that is ready to take on the mantle of leadership. That is how we ensure continuity and stability in our system. I will certainly let the Prime Minister know when I am ready, and I am also very sure that before too long, he will be reminding me and chasing me for a response. I will do so in due course.

Highlight

Since its founding, Singapore's political leadership has emphasized teams rather than individuals. In the past two years. The fourth-generation leaders fought the epidemic together and established a very good tacit understanding and stronger cohesion. I will do my best to ensure that the contribution from the entire team will be greater than the sum of the individual parts. That is how the team must work - that we synergise, and the overall contribution is greater than just the adding up of each individual contribution.