XTRA CABINET TALENT

FORESNERS AS S'PORE MINISTERS?

It's time to think out of the box for solutions to the limited talent pool here

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THE perennial quest to attract some of the best local talent into the Cabinet has led the Government to adopt some creative strategies. These range from offering high salaries to expanding the remit behind the formation of the Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs).

While the concept started out with the aim of ensuring minority representation in Parliament, senior Cabinet ministers have argued in recent years that the GRC scheme will help to bring into Parliament more women and potential ministers — who might otherwise not be elected if they were to contest in single-member constituencies.

Given that these strategies have yet to succeed fully — just listen to that familiar refrain of how difficult it is to get high-fliers to give up the comforts of the private sector for the rough and tumble of politics — perhaps it is time to examine some out-of-the-box solutions to a problem that is unlikely to go away anytime soon.

For example, while Taiwan's Parliament is notorious for its bickering, the island's electorate system may still be worth looking at in some ways.

The recent legislative polls saw 34 out of the 113 parliamentary seats reserved for legislators-at-large. Under the system, voters in each of the 79 constituencies would cast two ballots — one for their direct lawmaker and another for the political party they support. The 34 legislators-at-large seats would then be given to parties based on their percentage share of votes.

Such a scheme, if adopted in Singapore, would allow voters the best of both worlds — having an elected MP to high-achieving technocrats and party candidates.

For one, ministers with hectic schedules and who travel frequently — such as Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew and Foreign Minister George Yeo — could be placed under the PAP's list of candidates for legislators-at-large seats.

In the political sphere, there was speculation that the PAP lost some votes in Mr Yeo's Aljunied GRC due to his frequent absences.

Under the proposal, Mr Yeo, or other ministers with portfolios which often result in them being unable to spend more time on the ground, will be freed from constituency responsibilities including Meet-The-People sessions and — perhaps from having to pay the political price at the polls.

It will also raise the probability of high-achieving technocrats and professionals — who are good at policy-making and problem-solving but may not be comfortable with soft politics (kissing babies, mingling with residents) — giving the nod to joining politics.

As Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong told Parliament during the debate on pay hikes for the Civil Service, a minister's job covers many aspects.

"A minister ... is at least the full-time chairman, sometimes the CEO. He makes the big decisions and ... makes things happen."

"On top of that, we expect him to go out and deal with his constituents, we expect him to hug babies from time to time — it's all part of the job."

And finding a man or woman who fits both roles is not easy.

In the current political landscape, not all ministers have the kind of "people's touch" that, say, Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan and NTUC labour chief Lim Swee Say are noted for.

Surely, such an approach in Singapore will boost its chances of finding the right man for the right ministry. It may also well help Mr Lee end his search for the next Law Minister to succeed Professor S Jayakumar, who has held the post for the past 20 years and is the only other law minister Singapore has apart from Mr Edward Barker since 1965.

In all likelihood, there is no lack of capable candidates from the pool of law professors in universities, lawyers in private practice or within the Attorney-General's Chambers.

But to convince the short-listed candidate to accept the requirement that he has to contest the election before he could helm the Law Ministry is likely to be a daunting task for the PAP.

As Mr Lee seeks to gather the best possible team to provide the best possible national leadership for the next 10 to 20 years, one of his biggest challenges is to find the right talent.

The PAP government has always been ready to prescribe bitter medicine — such as CPF cuts, hike in ministerial salaries — when necessary.

In view of the apparent shortage of talent who are able and willing to serve in the political sphere, will the ruling party be prepared to introduce necessary reforms to the political system, however controversial they may seem?