

ADMISSION OF ADVOCATES AND SOLICITORS

CHIEF JUSTICE'S ADDRESS

2 JUNE 2001

Ladies and gentlemen, my heartiest congratulations to all of you on your admission this morning as advocates and solicitors of the Supreme Court of Singapore. I would also like to express my gratitude and congratulations to your parents whose love, support and guidance have helped you to develop into the fine men and women that you are today.

2. This year, the total number of people being admitted to the Bar is 173. Before today's proceedings, the number of advocates and solicitors in Singapore holding practising certificates for this year stood at 3233 (as at 23 May 2001). After today, it is hoped that this figure will rise to over 3380. Your admission will therefore provide a much needed boost to the dwindling number of practising lawyers in Singapore.

3. The face of legal practice has changed significantly. Lawyers today face increasing competition from foreign lawyers and also a diversity of demands from the financial, commercial and manufacturing sectors, which are leading the growth in Singapore's economy. Furthermore, these sectors will need more lawyers to handle the legal work emanating from these sectors in the future. According to a Manpower Ministry study, Singapore will need between 99 and 115 lawyers for every 100,000 people. Last year, this ratio was just 84 lawyers for every 100,000 people. In addition, the recent phenomenon of lawyers choosing to leave legal practice for non-legal sectors and for alternative employment as in-house legal counsel in private-sector enterprises has intensified the current shortage of lawyers facing Singapore today.

4. To deal with this issue, the government has taken steps to increase the supply of lawyers by upping the intake of law undergraduates at the National University of Singapore. There will also be an increase in the number of foreign universities from which law degrees will be recognised. Nevertheless, the existing high standards required of overseas graduates will be maintained. In order to gain admission to the Singapore Bar, graduates from the British universities must continue to obtain at least a Second Upper Honours degree. Those from the recognised Australian and New Zealand universities must graduate in the top 30 per cent of their cohort.

5. These measures are but one way of addressing the shortage of lawyers today. The practice of law has moreover changed dramatically as a direct result of the speed of globalisation and the advent of rapid developments in technology and science. There will be an increase in the volume, complexity and range of legislation; greater use of alternative models of dispute resolution; competition in the delivery of certain legal services; and corporatisation of the public sector.

6. To deal with the increasing demands for lawyers, and on lawyers, I would like to

issue two challenges today to all of you young and energetic new members of the Bar. First, I strongly urge you to constantly seek ways and means of broadening your knowledge and developing your expertise through continuing legal education. This is absolutely crucial to your ability to contribute to the continuation of Singapore's success story and achieve success in your careers. In this respect, life-long legal training is essential in order for you to deal with the new laws which have been promulgated and the legislation which has been revisited and revamped to deal with the explosion of developments and issues in intellectual property, information technology, ecommerce and trans-border commercial crimes.

7. Let me cite you an example. The scientific breakthroughs across the globe in the life sciences will have a great impact and result in changes to the laws of intellectual property, insurance and tort, just to name a few. Given the lack of jurisprudence in this novel field, it will fall upon the shoulders of the legal profession to contribute to the development of the law in a manner that will serve the best interests of society and the biotechnology industry. Already, the mobility of information across global borders has led to intellectual property claims over biotechnology products being litigated in the Singapore courts. Even the judiciary has recognised the need to be well-prepared for cases of such a nature. So, all Singapore judges, judicial commissioners and judicial officers have recently had to attend a series of life sciences classes conducted by research scientists from the Institute of Cell and Molecular Biology. Likewise, lawyers must seek to continually improve their skills in specialised areas such as these in order to argue their client's cases in an effective and knowledgeable manner. The local jurisprudence will be the richer for it.

8. My second challenge to each of you is to equip yourself with sufficient knowledge of technology and the means to exploit it. The capabilities of information technology increase by leaps and bounds every day. Innovations such as video conferencing and Internet technology have already helped to take the courtroom out of its static locality and brought it directly to the legal profession and society at large. In addition, steps have been taken to allow parties to seek alternative means of dispute-resolution via the Internet. At the end of last year, the Singapore judiciary launched an online mediation facility to enable disputes to be settled via cyberspace. With such initiatives, parties may now seek a more efficient, cost-effective and flexible recourse to their grievances.

9. You must also get to grips with the Electronic Filing Service (EFS), which has been up and running now for over a year. Phase 1.2 which requires compulsory electronic filing of all documents relating to writ actions commenced on or after 1 March 2000 has seen documents in about 52,000 writ actions filed electronically into the courts as of the end of last month. Phase 2.0 will complement the first phase. It will allow litigating parties to serve documents on each other electronically. It will also offer an electronic extract service which will enable lawyers to extract soft copies of documents filed electronically and all this through the EFS from the comfort of their own offices. Most importantly, the EFS will be migrated to the Internet environment, allowing lawyers to file documents electronically and use the services provided from anywhere in the world.

Over the next few years, many more of the transactions which currently require trips to the court premises or to law firms will be replaced by transactions conducted through the Internet once the EFS is fully launched. The vision of a paperless courtroom will no doubt quite soon become a reality.

10. In conclusion, I would like to remind each of you that while your ultimate responsibility as members of the Bar is to conduct yourself with honesty, integrity and professionalism, you must also learn to think out of the box, in accordance with the solemn oath and declaration that you have just made, instead of holding fast to old and archaic practices, and reinvent yourselves to meet the ever-evolving needs of society. As you face these challenges in your budding legal careers, I look forward to your support and co-operation with the courts in ensuring that the rule of law will continue to be upheld through the effective administration of justice in Singapore.

11. Once again, my warmest congratulations and best wishes in your future endeavours.