

FOUNDATION STONE LAYING CEREMONY
OF THE NEW SUPREME COURT BUILDING
KEYNOTE ADDRESS
BY THE HONOURABLE THE CHIEF JUSTICE

FRIDAY, 29 NOVEMBER 2002

Ladies and gentlemen, good morning. I am delighted that you are here today to join me as we mark another milestone in our nation's legal heritage.

2. When Sir Stamford Raffles founded Singapore in 1819, the British not only set up a trading outpost on this island, but also sowed the first seeds for the establishment of a strong legal framework – a legal framework which nowadays is consistently ranked amongst the best in international surveys. The grant of the Second Charter of Justice in 1826 established the Court of Judicature of Prince of Wales' Island, Singapore and Malacca. Since then our judicial system has evolved from having only three lay judges, one of whom traveled on circuit, to the constitution of the Supreme Court of Singapore after World War II, and finally to the ultimate abolition of all appeals to the Privy Council in 1994. As Singapore has emerged as a vital port of call and a key trading nation over the years, the workload of the courts has increased rapidly. All these momentous changes over time have resulted in the Supreme Court having to “move house” at a few key junctures in the development of the judicial system as the demands on the limited court facilities grew.

3. The Singapore judiciary had humble beginnings. Our law courts used to be housed in one room of a bungalow, called Maxwell House, which was rented by the government. It was only in 1865 that the courts had their own building; a building which is now familiarly known as Empress Place Building. Subsequently, the courts returned to Maxwell House, to which an extension wing was added to accommodate the expanding courts. By the end of the first quarter of the twentieth century, Singapore's rapid development resulted in a need for still larger premises to house the courts.

4. The present Supreme Court Building, opened its doors on 3 August 1939. It is the last of the great colonial-era neo-classical buildings in Singapore. Its grand dome is an immediately recognisable and treasured part of our nation's skyline as well as heritage. There were originally only four courts – the Chief Justice's court, two for the Puisne Judges and a Court of Appeal. As the years went by, more and more courtrooms were added as the judicial workload increased. By the 1980s, as the economy grew manifold over a few decades, the Supreme Court Building could no longer accommodate the judiciary's further expansion. As such, City Hall, which up till then had always been occupied by the executive arm of government, was renovated to house additional courtrooms.

5. The early 1990s saw the rigorous overhaul of the administration of the justice and the modernisation of all operations of the judiciary. It became painfully clear that the old colonial buildings in which the Supreme Court is housed could no longer adequately provide, over the long term, the facilities which a modern judiciary would require to dispense and administer justice effectively. As a matter of fact, by the time I became Chief Justice in 1990, the need for a new complex to house the expanding functions of the Supreme Court was imperative. The structure, layout and fittings of the present buildings are not suitably designed and constructed to support fully the latest technological advancements which we must harness to improve the work processes of the courts. The current security set-up for the judges and court staff also leaves much to be desired. For example, City Hall, which was not built as a courthouse, has no proper security routes for the judges, the public and the accused. Often, the judge, the accused and members of the public can be seen walking out of the same corridor at the end of the day's proceedings.

6. With the design and construction of the New Supreme Court Building, our vision is to create a courthouse which is the symbol of a still evolving judiciary. It must capture the essence of a judiciary adept at embracing the demands of the future, while maintaining its dignity and its historical roots. Designed by Foster and Partners, the new building, scheduled to be completed in 2005, will house 23 courtrooms and auxiliary court facilities, including a 600-seater auditorium, court conference rooms, separate witness rooms for each party, mediation chambers, a library, a legal heritage gallery and a restaurant. It will also house state-of-the-art technological systems to allow cases to be processed with greater ease and efficiency. The design of the new courthouse will be flexible enough to allow for future advances in the administration of justice as well as growing workloads. Ultimately, the architectural vocabulary of the New Supreme Court Building seeks to convey the image of dignity, incorruptibility, transparency and efficiency – qualities representative of Singapore's judicial system.

7. Our present courthouse has served the needs of the judiciary and our society over 63 years. The world is a very different place now, where the only certainty is uncertainty. Uncannily, the world which we inhabit at the beginning of the 21st century is facing the same level of trepidation as our predecessors faced when the foundation stone of the present Supreme Court Building was laid in 1937. Then, the world had just recovered from the throes of the Great Depression. The devastation of the Second World War which would soon follow was looming on the horizon. Still, the people at that time traversed through the uncertain times with bravery and stoicism. Today, as we lay the symbolic foundation stone of the New Supreme Court Building, similar challenges and uncertainties await us. I know not what exactly will happen tomorrow, or in the years ahead. However, what I know is this. As the history of our forefathers has proven, I am confident that our leaders and our citizenry will walk this solemn journey with courage, strong will and a deep respect for the laws which bind us together as a nation.

8. In the final analysis, let us not forget that any reform or initiative of the judiciary must be undertaken with the singular goal of fulfilling the judiciary's duty to provide for

the fair administration of justice. The dignity and stability of government, and the well-being and advancement of our society, depend on the competence and integrity of our justice system. On behalf of the Singapore judiciary, I give to our people this pledge – that we will administer the justice of this nation with integrity, judgment, dedication and courage. This day, as our judiciary mark the laying of the foundation stone of our new courthouse, we renew our commitment to maintain the rule of law in the land, which is the foundation of freedom and a condition of peace and prosperity for our people and our future.

9. Thank you very much.