

ADDRESS BY THE HONOURABLE THE CHIEF JUSTICE
NATIONAL DAY OBSERVANCE CEREMONY OF THE
SUPREME COURT BENCH AND
THE SINGAPORE LEGAL SERVICE
12 AUGUST 2000

The Honourable the Attorney-General, Judges of Appeal, Judges and Judicial Commissioners of the Supreme Court, and officers of the Singapore Legal Service, good morning.

This is a significant and a milestone event. For the very first time, we gather to celebrate and mark Singapore's National Day – its 35th birthday.

2. The National Anthem we sang reminds us of how proud and privileged we are to be Singaporeans. The National Pledge we just recited reminds us afresh that our nation is built on the immutable values of 'justice' and 'equality'. This must strike a special chord. The Supreme Court Bench and the Singapore Legal Service are key public institutions in our country. It is our constitutional and statutory role to uphold the Rule of Law and administer justice. We further good governance of the nation to promote and protect the interests of the people.

3. In his National Day Message 2000, the Prime Minister said, "We have progressed and thrived, because we have built up strong institutions founded on sound values. The government, the judiciary, the unions, our educational institutions, and the media – these key institutions have promoted the interests of the people. The public sector, the private sector and the people sector have worked together, to build a national consensus on what our challenges are and how to overcome them."

Brief history

4. The Supreme Court Bench and the Singapore Legal Service have witnessed, and have been contributors to, the significant moments in our history. These include the transition of Singapore from being part of the Straits Settlements, to a colony, to independence, to merger with Malaysia and to full independence, as well as various constitutional and parliamentary changes.

5. Singapore's judicial system traces its origins to the Second Charter of Justice of 1826. This charter set up the Court of Judicature of Prince of Wales' Island, Singapore and Malacca. After independence, the Supreme Court of Judicature Act constituted the Supreme Court. In 1965, there were 8 Supreme Court Judges. Today, the Supreme Court bench totals 18, including Judicial Commissioners, drawn from a broad cross-section of individuals from the Singapore Legal Service, the Bar and the Law Faculty.

6. As for the Singapore Legal Service, its first roots were in the Straits Settlements Legal Service in 1940. In 1958, pursuant to the Singapore (Constitution) Order-in-

Council, a separate Legal Service Commission was created. This has remained until today. On 29 March 1963, the Legal Service Commission decided, for administrative convenience, to divide the Legal Service into the two branches we know today: the judicial and the legal branch. In August 1965, the Legal Service consisted of 45 officers. Today, there is a fivefold increase to about 270 officers.

7. More importantly, these institutions have been greatly strengthened internally by comprehensive reforms, especially in recent years. Change has been imperative to ensure that these institutions remain vibrant and effective in securing the continuation of the Rule of Law, and in ensuring the fair administration of justice. These reforms have propelled the Singapore judicial and legal systems to the pole position which we enjoy today.

Past contributions

8. Indeed, we have discharged our duties effectively and efficiently. Recent surveys of the local community reflect a high degree of public trust and confidence in the justice system. Various international organisations have consistently rated Singapore's judicial and legal systems highly. Just last week, in 'Asian Intelligence' dated 2 August 2000, the report of PERC (Political and Economic Risk Consultancy Ltd), notes that the Singapore Judiciary enjoys an excellent reputation among the expatriates that PERC surveyed.

9. The report also states that the judicial system is regarded as probably the single most important institution that a country can have. It further states that the distinguishing characteristic that companies look for in determining their level of comfort with a particular system is their ability to use the legal system to address grievances and to enforce contracts and other rights. The high quality of these key institutions to which we belong is vital in nation building. The transparency of our judicial and legal institutions has secured social stability. It has also underpinned our economic competitiveness and success.

Challenges

10. What does the future portend? The world is facing an explosion of new technologies, knowledge and information. An increasingly globalised world, with greater liberalisation of markets, confronts us. In the new economy, there will be greater fluidity and mobility of people, goods and information. At every level, Singapore will face keen competition for global resources, technology and talent. Social changes will also test our cohesiveness. For instance, the problem of the digital and income divide is likely to be accentuated. The increased flow of people, especially the influx of foreign talent into Singapore, will alter the social fabric. In this contextual environment, the Rule of Law remains crucial. An efficient and effective legal framework will promote Singapore's commerce and trade, and attract scarce talent and investments. It will also serve to maintain social harmony.

Our continued role

11. We must continue to enhance the Rule of Law. In doing so, we must be conscious that the administration of justice is going to be much more complex in this era of rapid developments. We have to grapple with many new issues. New laws, structures, processes and procedure will be required.

12. On an individual level, the challenge will be to equip oneself with the necessary skills and knowledge. The need to learn, adapt and change has never been greater. As public institutions, talent is the key to continued vitality. In line with this, the Singapore Legal Service has taken bold steps to reaffirm its position as a premier service, in order to attract and retain talent. As you are aware, we have recently revamped the scheme of service, and a human resource unit to concentrate on looking after our people will be fully established soon. With the talent on board, we must be daring, creative and innovative in our approach to find solutions to new situations and scenarios.

Conclusion

13. We will rise to all these challenges. We will continue to strive for greater excellence. And we will continue to discharge our constitutional and statutory roles in this land we call home. Thank you.