

Keynote Address by Attorney-General Lucien Wong, S.C.

39th International Symposium on Economic Crime (ISEC)

5 September 2022

Promoting and sustaining integrity in public institutions: Singapore's approach

1. Mr Chairman, Saul Froomkin QC, Co-Chairman Professor Barry A. K. Rider, distinguished speakers, ladies and gentlemen. I would like to express my sincere thanks to Professor Rider for inviting me again to deliver one of the keynote addresses for this Symposium. When I was here for the 37th Symposium in 2019, the atmosphere was slightly brighter and the spirits were a little higher. Then came the COVID-19 pandemic. No one could have foreseen that the pandemic would go on to devastate the world, upend lives and allow new forms of economic crime to flourish. The pandemic has shown us that, like the virus, crimes can evolve just as fast, ever ready to exploit new vulnerabilities.
2. This week, we are gathered here to discuss the serious topic of corruption, amongst others. Let us start by looking at the problem in context. As of 2018, the World Economic Forum estimated the global cost of corruption to be at least USD 2.6 trillion, or 5 percent of the global Gross Domestic Product. According to the World Bank, businesses and individuals pay more than USD 1 trillion in bribes every year. Post 2018, the outlook is just as bleak. Take for instance, the COVID-19 pandemic. Even as governments across the world pump billions of dollars into the economy to curb the spread of the pandemic and support the declining economy, corruption rears its ugly head. Corruption seeps through the cracks, such

as in the process of procurement and contracting for COVID-19 vaccines and other healthcare supplies. Many senior public officials from all over the world have already been charged for corruption pertaining to COVID-related funds and contracts. We also hear of high-level political leaders being implicated in the bribery of public officials. They abuse their authority to skip quarantine or to jump the queue to receive vaccination. Beyond the numbers, corruption, in the words of my Chief Justice, is “*an insidious evil, which, if left unchecked, will seep into and infest society*”.

3. No country is immune from corruption. Singapore certainly does not have a perfect record, but we have had some measure of success in tackling corruption. I would like to briefly highlight two features of the Singapore system which have served us well in promoting and sustaining integrity in public institutions.

A. Strong Political Will Against Corruption

4. It is well-known that Singapore adopts a zero-tolerance policy towards corruption. Weeding out corruption has been high on Singapore’s agenda since 1959, before we obtained our independence. In 1960, Singapore enacted the Prevention of Corruption Act (“PCA”), which is the primary anti-corruption legislation in Singapore. The PCA contains broad provisions to regulate corrupt acts and transactions, including provisions which have extra-territorial effect. In 1992, Singapore further enacted the Corruption, Drug Trafficking and Other Serious

Crimes (Confiscation of Benefits) Act to allow the State to restrain and disgorge corrupt benefits and punish the laundering of criminal proceeds, including bribe money. These laws lay the groundwork to ensure that corruption in Singapore remains a high-risk and low-reward activity.

5. But the enactment of laws alone can scarcely be enough to deal with the scourge of corruption – these laws must be robustly enforced. This brings me to the second feature of our system: a diligent and efficient enforcement machinery.

B. A Diligent and Efficient Enforcement Machinery

6. The robust investigations conducted by Singapore’s anti-corruption agency, the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau, or “CPIB”, and the diligent prosecutions undertaken by the Crime Division of my office, the Attorney-General’s Chambers (“AGC”) form the foundation of our fight against corruption.
7. Let me elaborate on CPIB’s and AGC’s respective roles and how we work together.
8. I believe CPIB is the world’s oldest anti-corruption agency. Since its inception in 1952, CPIB has adopted a deterrent stance against corruption, ensuring that there are no cover-ups and that corruption is fought without fear or favour. CPIB officers are given necessary powers to arrest, search, and seize evidence without a warrant if there is credible information or reasonable suspicion that a corruption

offence has been committed. CPIB is independent, and may investigate anybody, including ministers and senior public officials. It will not hesitate to investigate corrupt offenders, regardless of status, creed, or rank. CPIB reports directly to the Prime Minister, and if the Prime Minister does not give it permission to proceed with an investigation, CPIB can go to the President for permission to proceed.

9. Separately, Singapore's prosecution agency is the Attorney-General's Chambers ("AGC"). Under Singapore's legal system, the Attorney-General is also the Public Prosecutor unlike in the UK where your roles are split, and in that role, I am vested with the control of all criminal prosecutions and proceedings in Singapore, including those for corruption offences.

10. The CPIB and AGC work closely together to robustly enforce and uphold Singapore's anti-corruption laws. Upon the conclusion of investigations by CPIB, investigation papers are handed over to AGC for assessment. AGC will then thoroughly assess the evidence before arriving at a prosecutorial decision.

11. In the context of maintaining integrity in public institutions, CPIB and AGC have worked tirelessly in their respective roles to investigate and prosecute public servants and even senior political office holders for corruption offences. We have never wavered when it comes to enforcing our laws, regardless of the position of the offender.

12. A strong political will, and the diligent and efficient enforcement of robust anti-corruption laws, have been instrumental in Singapore's anti-corruption fight, and thus far I think we are pretty successful.
13. But it would be incomplete to end here. The fight against corruption is not ours alone. In the well-connected world we live in today, the easy and swift transfers of funds across jurisdictions not only create convenience, but they also facilitate transnational corruption.

C. International Cooperation

14. Singapore recognises that international cooperation is key, and indeed, an indispensable part of that fight.
15. In our own small way, Singapore has contributed to this international effort through the provision of mutual legal assistance and our active participation in various international legal forums. For instance:
 - (a) We routinely provide mutual legal assistance to assist other countries in investigating and prosecuting corruption offences. Such assistance can take the form of asset recovery, retrieval of documents and financial records, freezing of assets, enforcement of foreign confiscation orders, and other

forms of permitted assistance. I think some of you have heard of IMDB. Singapore played a key role in the prosecution in Malaysia by providing assistance that Malaysia requested. We have mutual legal assistance treaties with several jurisdictions and are continuing to negotiate more such treaties. Besides bilateral treaties, we are also party to the ASEAN Treaty on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters, amongst other multilateral treaties providing for mutual legal assistance. When foreign delegates come to me to ask to negotiate treaties, I tell them not to worry. Even without a treaty, Singapore can provide mutual legal assistance based on reciprocity.

- (b) We are a signatory to the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC). In addition, CPIB is an active member of various international forums tackling corruption, such as the International Association of Anti-Corruption Authorities (IAACA) and the International Anti-Corruption Coordination Centre (IACCC) which coordinates global law enforcement responses to allegations of grand corruption.

D. Conclusion

16. I end with some closing remarks. There is a Chinese proverb: “上梁不正下梁歪”, which means that if the top beam is askew, the bottom beams supporting it will also be crooked. There is also an equivalent Malay saying: “Ikan busuk mulai dari kepala” which literally means “Fish rots from the head down”. Ultimately, keeping

a system clean must start at the very top. Those at the top will become the role models and set the attitudes and expectations for the public servants and institutions under them. We must establish leaders who have a strong political will to eliminate corruption. People of integrity must be continually appointed to run the systems and enforce the laws.

17. Over the years, through robust investigation and prosecution of corruption offenders, as well as constant education and reinforcement of our strong stance against corruption, Singapore has developed a society and culture that eschews corruption. Singaporeans have come to expect and demand a clean system and Singaporeans readily report cases of corruption when they encounter them. The people themselves thus also help to keep the leaders in check, creating a virtuous cycle of cleanliness from corruption.
18. However, since corruption is driven by human nature and greed, no one is immune from corruption, and we must not let our guard down against corruption.
19. I am therefore deeply grateful to the organisers of this Symposium, which brings together a stellar cast of eminent practitioners, regulators, and experts. It is only through learning from one another, and working together, that we stand a chance of tackling the scourge of corruption and transnational economic crime.

20. I look forward to the many interesting sessions lined up for us at the Symposium.
Please let me wish all of you, a very good and beneficial Symposium this week.
Thank you.

-- End --