

SPEECH BY THE  
HONOURABLE ATTORNEY-GENERAL

THE HONOURABLE ATTORNEY-GENERAL,  
*Mr Chan Sek Keong*

*May it please your Honours, Chief Justice, Judges of Appeal, Judges and Judicial Commissioners of the Supreme Court.*

The opening of the Legal Year 2000 marks the first formal sitting of the Supreme Court in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It has an added significance in being held in this historic chamber. It is therefore a great privilege for me to be the first person to address your Honours in the new millennium.

The last decade of the last century of our legal development was notable for the multi-faceted innovations that our legal institutions, led by the Judiciary, had introduced to enable our judicial and legal system to support the administration of justice in the new technological age. There was a sense of urgency and purpose in the undertaking. The administration of justice had to be firm and fair, and seen to be

so, dispensed with due expedition and efficiency. Justice must be made accessible to all through various routes of dispute resolution. These objectives required a revitalisation of the working structures and processes of the law institutions and the support of all its members. There was a palpable sense of mission in their endeavours. That of the Judiciary, as always, is to administer justice according to law. The Attorney General's Chambers articulated its mission as "to enhance the rule of law and constitutional government in Singapore by providing sound legal advice and assistance in developing a fair and responsible legal system, furthering good public administration, and protecting the interests of the state and of the people". That of the Law Society was made public as "to serve our members and the community by sustaining a competent and independent Bar which upholds the rule of law and ensures access to justice."



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These mission statements were not mere rhetoric or shibboleths cleverly dressed in mellifluous phrases. There was a genuine and intense desire, followed by sustained concrete action, singly or jointly, by the law institutions to achieve their goals. The result was the emergence of a judicial and legal system that enjoys the full confidence of the people. There was also an unintended effect. Our legal system was consistently in the past 6 years rated by international appraisal institutions as the best or among the best in supporting economic competitiveness. This is a great achievement. This extra dimension makes it even more critical for us to maintain our ranking.

The forces of globalisation in the coming decade will pose the greatest challenges for the legal sector in Singapore. For the Judiciary, it is the capability to consolidate and build on its achievements to further enhance the fair administration of justice. The momentum of the changes, reinforced by the institutionalisation of the best practices of the Judiciary, will provide this capability.

For the Bar, it is the capability to preserve its sense of pride and autonomy as the principal provider of legal services in Singapore law. To do this, it has to overcome several challenges. First, the demand for competitive legal services in Singapore law in the context of a liberalised financial sector and a fast changing and growing IT sector. Singapore's competitiveness as an international financial centre and an IT centre requires

competitive legal services. Secondly, the ability to provide the diversity of legal services that can enhance Singapore's position as a hub for legal services in the region. In this regard, the legal profession must help to preserve, or increase, Singapore's head start in the supply of legal services. Thirdly, the need for more law firms that can take full advantage of economies of scale to upgrade and diversify their practices, to consolidate and to expand beyond the small domestic market for legal services. The globalisation of legal services cannot be turned back. But, with foresight, planning and resolve, the profession can turn it to its advantage.

The Bill to allow joint ventures and formal alliances between Singapore law firms and offshore law firms and corporatisation of law firms is before Parliament. It should be enacted next week and will come into force soon after. It is another measure introduced by the Government to encourage Singapore law firms to become bigger and the bigger law firms to become better. If implemented well, the measures will lead to dramatic changes in the profile and organisation of legal practice in Singapore. The fusion in the practice of the law between onshore and offshore law firms will enable Singapore law firms to leapfrog the technology barrier to become a part of the global grid of legal services providers. They will be in a position to acquire the state of the art legal software in international financial work and be in the forefront of current developments.

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Singapore law firms should take advantage of this opportunity. Joint venture law firms are likely to attract better law graduates as they pay more and offer better prospects for career advancement and even migration to the world of finance. Moreover, the work has more cachet. I understand that the exodus of brighter law graduates to offshore law firms has already begun. I have also been told that the Hamlets among our lawyers are apprehensive that under the new dispensation their fate is in the hands of the Attorney-General. Let me assure you that it is not so. Their fate is in their own hands. They can either wring them or they can clap them.

In case I appear to be on the side of the big battalions, let me say that law practice in the world of business and finance is just one form of private practice. It is not the right career for those who seek other rewards from the law. It is not nobler than the work of the humble solicitor who finds job satisfaction in sorting out the personal or social problems of dysfunctional families or that of advocates who see their role as defenders of the weak against the powerful. There will always be an honourable role in our society for lawyers imbued with the higher ideals of the legal profession.

As for the Legal Service, of which the Attorney-General's Chambers may be regarded as its proxy, we can claim to have done our share in contributing to the enhancement of the legal system. We are in the forefront of law reform, although many in the profession may not know it. This year, we shall have for the first

time a dedicated Law Reform and Law Revision Division, raising the number of legal Divisions to five. Our International Affairs Division has been providing sterling service in international law. The work of the Criminal Justice Division will be strengthened by the return of all CAD DPPs to Chambers today. Our Legislation Division has been able to draft large numbers of Bills and subsidiary legislation. There are very few public sector discussions on law related matters in which we did not have a voice. We have seconded our officers to whichever Ministry their talents can be better deployed.

So, as we begin the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we can look back with a large degree of satisfaction on the state of justice and the rule of law in Singapore. The strong foundations we have today will make it easier for the next generation of judges and lawyers to build better designed and more efficient structures on them. I have great confidence in the future of the law and the rule of law in Singapore in this century. They will continue to provide the support for our social and economic progress.

On this note, I pledge to you, Chief Justice, the full support of the Attorney-General's Chambers for the work of the Judiciary in the months ahead. I would also like to wish you, Chief Justice, Judges of Appeal, Judges and Judicial Commissioners of the Supreme Court, the President of the Law Society, members of the Law Society, members of the offshore legal services sector and all present here today, continuing good health and a good year ahead.