

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY
CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

OPENING OF THE LEGAL YEAR 2006
7 JANUARY 2006

ATTORNEY-GENERAL'S SPEECH

May it please you, Chief Justice and Judges of the Supreme Court:

We witnessed a few hours ago a momentous event that marks another milestone in the administration of justice in Singapore: the official opening of the new Supreme Court building by the President of Singapore.

2 The new Supreme Court building is intended to reflect all that is new and efficient in the administration of justice in Singapore in the 21st century. With its radical design and layout, it has moved away from the traditional idea of what halls of justice should look like, and has generated a heated discussion of its architectural merits among our foremost architects. We can safely leave it to history to judge whether it is a milestone in the history of Singapore architecture.

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3 For those of us whose working lives are spent in this building, we are concerned more with the facilities that it can provide. If we cannot achieve excellence in both form and function, we as lawyers would prefer function to form, such as public accessibility, people-friendliness, convenience to counsel, litigants, court reporters and the general public, serviceability for hearings and trials, and not least, comfort and security for the most important users of the building, the Judges. All these facilities are found in this building, including facilities for storage, retrieval and multi-modal communication at broadband speed. They are essential accessories to the efficient administration of justice in the courts, but they do not assure that justice will be done in every case.

4 In a Straits Times article published on 2 August 1939 in connection with the opening of the former Supreme Court building 66 years ago, an unnamed court reporter wrote:

"From tomorrow, the Bench, the Bar, the plaintiffs and the defendants, the accused, the spectators and the reporters at the Supreme Court will be housed in marble halls. But the trials will be no more interesting, and the judgments no more impressive, because of the imposing surroundings.

[Our] courts of justice will never lose their dignity, no matter where the Bench and the Bar may sit, whether they be deciding an action for breach of promise of marriage, or the fate of a man being tried for his life."

These observations remain true today. The fundamentals of how justice should be administered will not change however grand our court buildings may be. Only judges of integrity and independence, ^{impartial} and sensitive to what due process and substantive justice require, can assure that justice is and seen to be done. Singapore has inherited a conception of justice and the rule of law that has served its people well. We have an obligation to the future generations of Singaporeans to preserve this inheritance.

5 So, our attendance this morning for the opening of the Legal Year 2006 is just another step in our annual pilgrimage to the altar of justice. It is a never ending journey because relations between man and man and man and state are often at odds and require peaceful resolution through the processes of law. In 1823 Raffles issued a proclamation on how justice should be administered in his nascent settlement as follows:

"Let the principles of [our] law be applied not only with mildness, but with patriarchal kindness and indulgent consideration for the prejudices of each tribe as far as natural justice will allow, but also with reference to their reasoning powers, however weak, and that moral principle, which however often disregarded, still exists in the consciences of all men."

Let all the native institutions, as far as regards religious ceremonies, marriage and inheritance, be respected when they may not be inconsistent with justice and humanity and injurious to the peace and morals of society.

Let all men be considered equal in the eye of the law."

6 With some modifications, Raffles' exhortation that justice must be administered with appropriate benevolence and sensitivity in a multi-racial and multi-religious society in the social and political conditions of 1823 is no less relevant to us today. We have the same vision of equal justice for all before the law. Our material circumstances may have changed very much for the better, but the quest for justice will not change. Our conception of the rule of law today may be more refined and inclusive, but the need for impartial and independent courts to dispense justice to all those who seek justice from them will remain. Our courts have acquired a high reputation for integrity, impartiality, professionalism and efficiency in the way they process and dispose of legal disputes. Now and again, we are criticised for the strict application of our laws, especially in the administration of criminal justice, but we who live and work here can see its benefits to the people.

7 The Law Officers of the State play an integral ^{part} ~~role~~ in assisting in the administration of justice. Every year, on this occasion, we express our support to you, Chief Justice and

Judges of the Supreme Court, in your work in the days ahead. So once again, I do so, today. On behalf of the Law Officers of the State, I pledge our full support in your endeavours to serve the people of Singapore as ministers of justice.

8 May I now on behalf of the Law Officers of the State, wish you Chief Justice, Judges, ^{of the SC} Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Law, the President of the Law Society, and all present, continuing good health and a rewarding year.