

**SINGAPORE ACADEMY OF LAW
LAW WEEK 2013 OPENING SEGMENT**

MONDAY 22 JULY 2013

ADDRESS BY THE CHIEF JUSTICE

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

1 It gives me great pleasure to welcome you this morning to the opening segment of Law Week, another of the milestone activities that have been planned in conjunction with the 25th anniversary celebrations of the Singapore Academy of Law (“the Academy”). Earlier this year, in January, we launched a commemorative Silver Jubilee logo, as well as a microsite detailing the activities and programmes for this year of celebration; and in April, a conference was jointly organised by the Academy and the Chancery Bar of England and Wales. Entitled “Finance, Property and Business Litigation in a Changing World”, the conference saw leading luminaries, experts and practitioners from the UK and Singapore discuss current issues, challenges and trends concerning modern day commercial litigation.

2 A great deal of effort and time has been invested into these as well as other planned activities and programmes, including this Law Week. As such, I should begin by sharing my thoughts on why the coming of age of the Academy over the course of the last 25 years gives us such cause for celebration.

The Singapore Academy of Law

3 The Academy was established in November 1988,¹ and was officially opened at the historic City Hall Building in 1990 by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. Mr Lee was instrumental in supporting the idea of establishing the Academy and he was later honoured as its first Honorary Member and Fellow for Life. The Academy's inaugural President, Chief Justice Wee Chong Jin, saw the Academy as a unifying institution providing a social and professional platform for all members of the Singapore legal fraternity to come together "to enrich and enhance the knowledge and the development of the law in Singapore through the sharing of experience and expertise".² I believe over the course of the last 25 years, we have held steadfastly to these founding notions.

4 Indeed, the Academy has grown from strength to strength over the past quarter century. At the time of its inception, the Academy was vested with a number of statutorily prescribed functions,³ which Chief Justice Wee had

¹ Via the *Singapore Academy of Law Act 1988* (Act 18 of 1988) ("SAL Act 1988") that commenced on 1 November 1988.

² See Address by Wee Chong Jin CJ at the Opening of the Singapore Academy of Law (31 August 1990), online: <http://www.sal.org.sg/Lists/Speeches/DispForm.aspx?ID=29>.

³ Section 4(1) of the *SAL Act 1988* states:

The functions of the Academy shall be as follows:

- (a) to promote and maintain high standards of conduct and learning of the legal profession in Singapore;
- (b) to promote the advancement and dissemination of knowledge of the laws and the legal system and to promote research and scholarship;
- (c) to provide continuing legal education for its members;
- (d) to provide legal training and education for persons intending to practise the profession of law;
- (e) to consider proposals and suggestions regarding matters which are referred to the Academy by the Law Society or the Board;

described as giving it a “very wide and ambitious brief”.⁴ Amongst other things, the Academy was tasked to “promote and maintain high standards of conduct and learning of the legal profession”, “promote the advancement and dissemination of knowledge of the laws and legal system”, as well as to “promote research and scholarship”.⁵ As we look back on a memorable 25 years, I think it is fair to say that the Academy has not disappointed. In fact, several additions were subsequently made to its remit,⁶ so much so that today, the Academy has 14 committees⁷ to enable it to discharge 13 statutory functions.⁸ The Academy has had many significant milestones and achievements during this time,⁹ and I wish to highlight just some of these:

(f) to refer to the Law Society or the Board proposals and suggestions regarding matters which in the opinion of the Senate require consideration by the Law Society or the Board; and

(g) to promote good relations and social interaction amongst members and between members and law students and persons concerned in the administration of law and justice in Singapore.

⁴ *Supra*, n 2.

⁵ *Supra*, n 3.

⁶ See s 3 of the *Singapore Academy of Law (Amendment) Act 1995* (Act 34 of 1995) that commenced on 10 November 1995.

⁷ Comprising the (1) Executive Committee; (2) Annual Lecture Organising Committee; (3) Board of Commissioners for Oaths and Notaries Public; (4) Council of Law Reporting; (5) Electronic Litigation Committee; (6) Promotion of Singapore Law Committee; (7) LawNet Management Committee; (8) Law Reform Committee; (9) Legal Education & Studies Committee; (10) Legal Heritage Committee; (11) Membership and Social Committee; (12) Professional Affairs Committee; (13) Publications Committee; and (14) Steering Committee on Strategic Direction.

⁸ Section 4(1) of the *Singapore Academy of Law Act* (Cap 294A, 1997 Rev Ed) states:

The functions of the Academy shall be as follows:

(a) to promote and maintain high standards of conduct and learning of the members of the legal profession in Singapore and the standing of the profession in the region and elsewhere;

(b) to promote the advancement and dissemination of knowledge of the laws and the legal system;

(c) to promote legal research and scholarship and the reform and development of the law;

(d) to provide continuing legal education for its members;

(e) to provide for the training, education and examination, by the Academy or by any other body, of persons intending to practise the profession of law;

(f) to consider proposals and suggestions regarding matters which are referred to the Academy by the Law Society or the Institute;

(g) to refer to the Law Society or the Institute proposals and suggestions regarding matters which in the opinion of the Senate require consideration by the Law Society or the Institute;

- (a) The publication of the inaugural issue of the Singapore Law Reports in 1992;
- (b) The inauguration of the Academy Annual Lecture series in 1994 when the first Lecture was delivered by the late the Right Honourable Lord Taylor of Gosforth. We will have the 20th Annual Lecture this year;
- (c) The launch in 1995 of a regular series of conferences held at five-yearly intervals to review trends and developments in Singapore Law;
- (d) The institution of the Senior Counsel scheme and the appointment of the first batch of Senior Counsel in 1997;
- (e) The launch of the Singapore Mediation Centre in 1997;

(h) to promote good relations and social interaction amongst members and between members and law students and persons concerned in the administration of law and justice in Singapore;

(i) to appoint persons as notaries public or commissioners for oaths and to authenticate their signatures;

(j) to undertake activities and projects relating to the study, development and operation of laws and legal systems and the facilities, information technology and infrastructure in support thereof;

(k) to provide consultancy and other services relating to the study, development and operation of laws and legal systems and the facilities, information technology and infrastructure in support thereof;

(ka) to hold moneys, whether as stakeholder or in any other capacity, for the purposes or members of the legal profession in Singapore or under any written law; and

(l) to exercise the functions and duties conferred on the Academy under any written law.

⁹ For the milestones and achievements of the Academy, see online: http://www.sal.org.sg/content/abt_us_milestones.aspx.

- (f) The launch of the Legal Workbench, an online legal research tool and repository service, in 1998;
- (g) The formation of the Council of Law Reporting to oversee law reporting in Singapore in 2002;
- (h) The launch of the SingaporeLaw website, an online information portal promoting Singapore law in 2006, of LawNet2 in 2007, and of the Singapore Law Watch, an online daily legal news portal, in 2008;
- (i) The inauguration of the Junior College Law Programme to introduce students to law as a career choice in 2009;
- (j) The launch of the Singapore Law Reports (Reissue) in 2010; and
- (k) The formation of the Singapore Institute of Legal Education responsible for preparing qualified persons to be called to the Singapore Bar, as well as their continued education and training, in 2011.

5 These are just part of the rich diversity of activities that have greatly enhanced the experience of working in the legal services sector in Singapore, and it is well to take a moment to acknowledge those who have made it all a

reality. For a start, the Academy would not be where it is today without the tireless efforts of its past Presidents and the many members who have served faithfully and selflessly on the Senate and the Committees of the Academy. They in turn have been ably supported by a dedicated team of professional staff led by Chief Executive Serene Wee who has been here since 1 November 1993 and will complete her 20th year with the Academy this year.

6 We can certainly take pride as members, of the role that the Academy has grown into. Given its significance to the legal fraternity and the pivotal position the Academy has come to assume, I think there is ample reason for us to celebrate its 25th anniversary.

Rationale for Law Week

7 This brings me to Law Week. What prompted us to organise this? For the uninitiated, an encounter with the law can be unpleasant, even painful and traumatic, as they come face to face with the unknown on uncharted territory. Familiarity with the law must help alleviate some of this quite natural anxiety. As such, the movement to demystify the law for the public has gained momentum here and elsewhere, especially in recent times. The aim ultimately is to engender greater public awareness of legal processes and rights, and to instil confidence that the law exists for all, to safeguard their well-being and interests.

8 It is unsatisfactory if the procedures, systems, processes and mechanisms that we have in place to assist the public are not known to them and hence not accessed by them when they need it. I have spoken previously on the challenge of information inadequacy and how it can impede or even prevent parties from resolving their legal matters in the most effective, efficient and affordable manner.¹⁰ Simply put, members of the public need to be made aware of the resources that are available to assist them; they need to know how and where they may seek and find these resources if they are to actually utilise them. In this regard, I wish to highlight the assistance that the Community Justice Centre, which was launched earlier this year in conjunction with the Subordinate Courts Workplan for 2013, will be able to provide in helping its users find holistic solutions for their legal issues.

9 With these broad rationales in mind, to demystify the law, bridge information gaps as to available resources and ensure meaningful access to such resources, Law Week was planned around four primary objectives to:

- (a) Encourage members of the Academy to get involved in pro-bono activities and to this end, to equip them with up-to-date knowledge on legal developments so that they would be better able to serve the community;

¹⁰ See keynote address of the Chief Justice during the Subordinate Courts Workplan Seminar 2013 (1 March 2013) at [6], online: <http://app.supremecourt.gov.sg/data/doc/ManagePage/4621/Keynote%20Address%20by%20the%20Honourable%20the%20Chief%20Justice%20Sundaresh%20Menon%20at%20Subordinate%20Courts%20Workplan%202013.pdf>.

- (b) Create greater public awareness of legal rights and to provide essential information to the public to raise awareness about community law;
- (c) Inform the public about available pro-bono services; and
- (d) Bring pro-bono services closer to the community.

Accordingly, throughout this week, there will be activities and programmes planned for the legal fraternity as well as the public at large in keeping with these objectives. This is an inaugural event and it may be worthwhile to consider holding it annually if we conclude that it has substantively achieved these aims.

Continuing legal education

10 Over the course of a series of ten sessions, guest speakers from the public service, private practice and academia will update members on current developments in the law. There will be some sessions on specialised areas of the law but the majority of the sessions will focus on areas of law that affect the community, namely criminal law and procedure, mediation, contract law, tort law, civil procedure, as well as constitutional and administrative law. The aim is to arm members with knowledge of the current state of the law in these areas, so that they are better placed to serve the community.

11 We have also commissioned an exhibition at the Supreme Court. This is targeted primarily at the public and aims to educate them on aspects of two familiar areas of community law, namely criminal law and family law.

12 To emphasise the importance of pro bono involvement and services, there will be a focus session after this address moderated by Justice Rajah, who happens also to chair the committee studying and developing initiatives to ensure an adequate supply of community legal services. I urge you to stay for this session and hear the speakers' insights on strategic, operational and personal perspectives of pro bono work. I especially wish to mention the video that will be presented during this session. It showcases very poignantly the unhappy and tragic encounters with the law that some are unfortunate enough to have. This can often come about through circumstances that seem beyond their control. The desperate apprehension they experience when they must face the sharp end of the law on their own can truly be crushing. The video brings home the reality that there are some real human tragedies in our society; but also that there is a silver lining to this dark cloud and it is the hope that comes from knowing that these tragedies can be mitigated, if not averted altogether, if lawyers play their part to lend a hand. In these stories we see that the practice of law can be enormously empowering for those who choose to answer the call to be more involved in pro bono activities and I am confident many of you will indeed take this up after today.

13 This video was single-handedly produced by one of our members, Mr Josephus Tan, who went out of his way to accede to my request to get it

ready by today. Josephus is no stranger to pro bono work; in fact he is extremely dedicated to this cause. He worked tirelessly to locate and interview the people featured in the video, and wove their stories into a memorable presentation. He did this within a very short span of time and the product of his efforts will bring home the important message that indeed, each of us can truly make a difference when we resolve to help others. It is a superb piece of work and I am very grateful to Josephus for his personal effort to get this done.

Legal talks and clinics for the public

14 To bring pro bono services closer to the community, free legal talks and clinics for the public will be held over four evenings at the Supreme Court and at the Subordinate Courts respectively during Law Week. These talks will focus on a range of topics relevant to the average Singaporean, namely criminal proceedings, employment matters, personal insolvency, family law, estate management and consumer protection. Volunteer lawyers will also conduct free on-site legal clinics for pre-registered participants with the assistance of students from the National University of Singapore and Singapore Management University law schools. I am given to understand that the response for the talks and legal clinics has been so overwhelming that there are plans to hold additional sessions after Law Week. We have also had to arrange for the legal talks to be held in this auditorium to accommodate as many interested participants as possible.

15 I would like to acknowledge the volunteer lawyers from the Law Society, the volunteer students from the law schools of both universities, the Community Justice Centre, the People’s Association and the Community Development Councils for their support and involvement in this initiative. I should also mention our gratitude to the Singapore Police Force and the Central Narcotics Bureau, the Association of Women for Action and Research and the Centre for Promoting Alternatives to Violence, for agreeing to man the public information and awareness booths at the Subordinate Courts during these evenings. Food and refreshments are being provided by the catering arm of the Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises.

Launch of “Know the Law NOW!” publication, interactive pro bono services directory, and *Legal Help* website

16 I am also pleased to launch three things this morning. These are first, a special commemorative publication entitled “Know the Law NOW!” which I think is in each of your packs; second, an interactive pro bono services directory; and third, the *Legal Help* website.

“Know the Law NOW!” special commemorative publication

17 In my foreword to the publication, “Know the Law NOW!”, I said that the book is a commendable project to demystify the law and to bring its essence to the average citizen in areas with which they are likely to come into contact. It has achieved this without resorting to legalese and technical jargon. The

title is especially apt as it conveys a sense of urgency for the public to understand the law and their own legal rights. The publication will be available in hard copies as well as online. Some copies have already been distributed this morning with the remainder to be distributed at the legal talks and clinics that will be held at the Supreme Court and at the Subordinate Courts, as well as at community centres and Community Development Councils.

18 I commend the collaborative efforts of the Academy's Law Week Committee and the Law Society's Law Awareness Committee in this endeavour. I would also like to acknowledge the work of the Chinese Interpreters' Section from the Subordinate Courts for their assistance with the translation that was required in order to enable us to launch the Mandarin edition of this publication today, as well as the kind and generous sponsorship of Portcullis Trust (Singapore) Ltd.

Interactive directory on legal clinics services

19 Let me turn to the interactive pro bono services directory. I have spoken on the importance of letting the public know what resources are available and how they can get to them. To enhance the prospects of users finding just what they need, all information on the availability of pro bono services will be re-consolidated in the form of an interactive directory that will be hosted on the Law Society's Pro Bono Services Office website. This will give users a snapshot of all legal clinics services available in Singapore. Users will be able to obtain relevant information, such as the location,

frequency and timing of the legal clinics, when they mouse-over certain areas on a map of Singapore. Through such efforts, the public can get clear and complete information about available pro bono services in Singapore easily and conveniently.

Legal Help website

20 Last but not least, let me touch on the Legal Help Website. We have become accustomed to accessing information by applying a few keyboard strokes and mouse clicks. The public is increasingly tech-savvy and comfortable with looking for information and answers on the web instantaneously. The web also allows us to reach out to more people. We need to keep up with these changing realities by harnessing the use of technology and establishing an online presence so that access to justice may also be enhanced through the use of cyberspace.

21 With funding from the Academy's Innovations and Ideas Scheme, *Legal Help*, an interactive web portal, was conceived as a site where the public can pose their queries online and get general legal information promptly. I am pleased to launch it today and I would like to commend and acknowledge the efforts of the originators, a team of former Law Clerks, Mr Daryl Chew, Mr Goh Yihan, Ms Loh Tann-Ling and Ms Una Khng, as well as the many volunteer lawyers who have agreed to support this platform.

Concluding words

22 Let me close by saying something about the planned programmes and activities that you can expect after Law Week. The Academy's Annual Lecture will be held in September. This event is known for the eminence of guest speakers and this year is no exception. We are delighted that Chief Justice Robert French from the High Court of Australia has very kindly accepted our invitation to deliver the annual lecture this year. In the same month, there will also be the highly-anticipated charity concert in support of the Yellow Ribbon Fund show-casing some of the finest talents from the legal fraternity. I am certain they will put up an impressive musical performance and proves that in fact, Law's Got Talent.

23 In November, we will host a dinner to express our appreciation to the members of the various committees of the Academy, who have selflessly volunteered to serve and without whom it would be impossible for the Academy to discharge its functions and to further its good work. We will also honour the efforts of those members who have contributed significantly to the work of the Academy through the years as well as acknowledge the hard work of those who have been involved in planning the year-long Silver Jubilee programme and will by then have brought the Academy's 25th anniversary celebration to completion. We have much still to look forward to.

24 It remains for me to declare Law Week open. I wish all of you a fulfilling time this week and I look forward to your active participation in the rest of the planned activities and programmes. Thank you very much.