

A heartfelt tribute to a remarkable man

Chief Justice Chan Sek Keong has been an inspiration to all who know him

Tommy Koh

The Business Times, 5 November 2012

TODAY, Chief Justice Chan Sek Keong will celebrate his 75th birthday and retire. This is an appropriate moment for us, who have known him for 55 years, to pay him a tribute.

Childhood

Sek Keong was born and grew up in Ipoh, Perak. His father was a clerk in a bank and the family had very modest means. Sek Keong was a very good student and topped the whole of Perak in his Cambridge Overseas School Leaving Certificate examinations. He came to Singapore in 1957, to join the pioneer batch of law students at the then University of Malaya, in Singapore (now the National University of Singapore, or NUS).

Law student

There was a special esprit de corps which united our class. We were very close to one another and to our teachers, who were in many cases only a few years older than the students. The three of us belonged to a study group which met almost every day to review our work. Sek Keong was the "tutor" of the group and would explain the intricacies of the laws of property and trust when our teachers could not. When he typed a case note, he would make extra carbon copies to give to the rest of us. His understanding of the law, his lucidity and unselfish nature were some of his positive attributes. He was a kind, fair-minded and courteous person. He has remained true to the values and beliefs of his student days.

Legal career

He was in private law practice in Singapore for 23 years, from 1963 to 1986. In 1986, he was appointed as a judicial commissioner. Two years later, in 1988, he was appointed a judge of the Supreme Court. Four years later, his career took a different trajectory. He served as the attorney-general from 1992 to 2006, a total of 14 years. In 2006, he was appointed as the chief justice. To sum up, Sek Keong spent 23 years in law practice, 14 years as the attorney-general and 12 years on the Bench, six of which as the chief justice. The NUS Law School is very proud of him because he is the first local graduate to be appointed as judicial commissioner, judge, attorney-general, and chief justice. We, his old classmates from the Law School, salute him for the following reasons.

A modest and humble man

First, we salute him because he is unspoiled by power, status and wealth. He has never forgotten his humble roots. He leads a simple and frugal life. He remains a modest and humble person.

A man of integrity

Second, he is a man of integrity. As a result, he is trusted by all who have dealings with him. He had an excellent reputation with his clients when he was in legal practice. As chief justice, he has earned the trust and respect of the government, the legal profession and the public. In an opinion poll, commissioned by the Reader's Digest, he was picked by the Singapore public as the person they trusted the most.

A fair-minded person

Third, he is fair-minded and believes strongly that the law should render justice. When he became the chief justice, he was aware that there was a concern that efficiency was being pursued to such an extreme that it could jeopardise the dispensation of justice. In his first speech as the chief justice, he said: "Both justice delayed and justice hurried can cause injustice . . . Judges must not judge in haste or prejudge disputes in order to dispose of cases faster . . . no litigant should be allowed to leave the courtroom with the conviction or feeling that he has not been given a fair or full hearing because it was done hurriedly." (April 22, 2006)

Courtesy and patience

Fourth, he is always courteous and patient. Young lawyers often fear appearing before the Supreme Court. They fear that the judges would expose their ignorance and humiliate them, in front of their clients and the public. In the same speech referred to above, he said: "I assure the Bar that young lawyers who appear before me and my fellow judges should not feel stressed and should have no fear of being stressed." Although he could have demolished a bad argument addressed to him in court, he has never humiliated or belittled the lawyer putting forward the argument. His philosophy is to "live and let live". During his tenure as chief justice, he has developed a more cordial and harmonious relationship between Bench and Bar.

Legal scholar

Fifth, Sek Keong has a profound knowledge of the law. This is evident in all his written judgments, which are a joy to read. His judgments are always based on sound legal reasoning. They are lucidly and elegantly written as he is an accomplished wordsmith. It would be true to say that "there are few areas of the law which he did not touch and little that he touched which he did not adorn". The chief justice leaves a substantial legacy of world-class judgments which have enriched our jurisprudence. In conclusion, we wish to say that Chan Sek Keong has served Singapore with great distinction, both in the private and public sectors. As attorney-general and as the chief justice, he has carried out his responsibilities with integrity and fairness. He has enhanced the reputation of the Singapore judiciary and reinforced Singapore's commitment to the rule of law.

Tommy Koh is ambassador-at-large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a professor of law, and served as dean of the NUS Law School from 1971 to 1974. TPB Menon is a lawyer in private practice and was president of the Singapore Law Society.