

ADMISSION OF ADVOCATES & SOLICITORS

Wednesday, 13 May 2020

Address by Justice Vincent Hoong

1. It is my pleasure to congratulate each and every one of you on your admission as an advocate and solicitor of the Supreme Court of Singapore. You have done both yourself and your parents proud in achieving this significant milestone. In the next few minutes, I would like to share with you some thoughts on the noble profession you are now formally part of, and to offer some words of advice, which I hope you will find useful in the course of your professional career.

I. A Noble Profession

2. I begin by inviting you to consider with me what it means for you to have formally joined a *noble profession*. Lord Macmillan, one of the Law Lords who presided over the seminal decision of *Donoghue v Stevenson*, had this to say:

The difference between a trade and a profession is that the trader frankly carries on his business primarily for the sake of pecuniary profit while the members of a profession ***profess an art*** ... The professional man finds his highest

rewards in his sense of his ***mastery of his subject*** ... and in the contribution which, by reason of his attainments, he can make to the ***promotion of the general welfare***.¹

(emphasis added)

3. This quote reminds me that what it means for us to be in a *profession* is that all of us profess a common *art*, or a craft if you like – one that is built upon a mastery of the law and directed towards the common good of society. This profession is a *noble* one because it “exists to serve the ends of justice and fairness”.² As a newly admitted advocate and solicitor, you are now an officer of the court and have been given “the unique responsibility of upholding the legal system and the quality of justice”³ in society.

4. Yet, we read of scandals involving fellow members of our profession. We hear also of the grave challenges and disruptions our profession is facing, even more so in this present health crisis; and it is only human to fear what the future holds. The fact that we are conducting these proceedings remotely is a sign of the many changes that have become necessary and are likely to remain so. This is the new normal. Because the challenges are indeed real,

¹ Hugh P MacMillan, *Law and Other Things* (1937) at p 127.

² *Law Society of Singapore v Ahmad Khalis bin Abdul Ghani* [2006] 4 SLR 308 at [81] (per Andrew Phang JA).

³ *Wong Keng Leong Rayney v Law Society of Singapore* [2006] 4 SLR 934 at [84] (per V K Rajah J, as he then was).

and the pitfalls many, you must commit yourself to a set of fundamental values that will serve as a guiding light for you as you begin your journey on the long and winding road ahead. It is your commitment to these values which will determine if *your* career in the law will be a meaningful, and indeed, a noble one.

II. Committing to a Life of Integrity and Learning

5. Please allow me to share with you two values which I hope you will imbibe and commit to upholding: First, a life of integrity; and second, a life of learning.

The importance of integrity

6. First, integrity. Integrity is the measure of how firmly you hold on to your moral convictions and the ethical standards expected of you, and in particular how honest you are with yourself and with others. The oath which you have just taken is a pledge of integrity – that you will “*truly and honestly*” conduct yourself. Integrity is invaluablely precious because it is the one thing that no person or power can ever take away from you. Let that sink in for a while. In life, a lot of things we hold dear to, no matter how hard we may labour, are in some ways contingent on what others think or do – the security or sanctity of our job, our possessions, and even our

relationships or our freedom. But our integrity is what we have full control over. If you commit and work hard to always preserve your integrity, you will *not* and *cannot* lose it, no matter the circumstances.

7. Your commitment to live a life of integrity speaks not just of your personal reputation, important as that is, but also the reputation of the entire profession. If each of us play our part and conduct ourselves *truly and honestly* when carrying out our professional duties, the fruit we will collectively reap is no less than a legal system trusted and admired by our fellow citizens, the hallmarks of a society flourishing under the rule of law.

8. An advocate and solicitor who commits to a life of integrity is one who conscientiously upholds the professional ethical standards expected of an officer of the Court. You will be someone who honours your word; and always reflect on whether your intended actions are consistent with your moral convictions. This, of course, requires much effort – and to succeed, you have to work on it on a daily basis. As the best-selling author David Brooks described in his book *“The Road to Character”*, “[y]ou can’t be the good person you want to be unless you wage this campaign [to]

build a solid moral core” – a campaign that is marked by “*habitual self-discipline*”, to develop “*a quiet but solid sense of right and wrong – not only to do good, but to be good*”.⁴

The importance of learning

9. Next, I encourage you to commit to a life of learning. Your oath to conduct yourself “*according to the best of [your] knowledge and ability*” will only be a meaningful, positive force if you take it upon yourself to consistently seek greater knowledge and improve your ability or craft. Our profession has always been known as a *learned* profession; and here I echo the words of Chief Justice Menon that this is a privilege “*we must constantly strive to show ourselves worthy of*”.⁵ To be an excellent lawyer, you must first be an excellent learner. Never believe for a moment that your learning should slow, let alone cease, just because you have graduated from University.

10. The pace of change and disruption to our economy and our profession today compels us to constantly seek to improve our knowledge and skills both in breadth and depth, lest we be made

⁴ David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (2015) at pp x, 12, 263-264.

⁵ Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, *Mass Call Address 2019: A Profession of Learners* (27 August 2019) at [2].

obsolete by the twin forces of globalisation and technological advances. This may seem daunting. But that is why it is critically important for you to be *always* learning new things, *relearning* old ones, and then to adapt, reskill and even revolutionise your area of practice accordingly. Only then would you find yourself in a position to transform these challenges into opportunities.

11. There is a Chinese idiom which epitomizes this spirit I am taking about – *Xue2 Wu2 Zhi3 Jing4*, 学无止境. “*The path of learning knows no boundaries*”. May that be an accurate description of your professional life in the law. Learn not just the specific area of law in which you practise, and learn not only about the law as well, but the world around you.

12. On this point, Mr Lim Siong Guan, former head of the Singapore Civil Service, had this to say in a book he co-authored titled “*Winning with Honour*”:

...the best way to learn is to ask questions and to confront reality, but always to do this with humility to learn from any situation and from anyone. Learning is the heart of progress and the heart of improvement, and therefore the heart of success. Be open, be humble, be intentional.⁶

⁶ Lim Siong Guan and Joanne H Lim, *Winning With Honour* (2016) at pp 45-46.

III. Conclusion

13. So this is my advice to you: anchor yourself on the fundamental values of integrity and lifelong learning. For these are the values that will steer and guide you throughout your working career – from start to end, through all the ups and downs which you may encounter along your journey. In times of immense pressure or despair, it is your integrity that will keep you on the straight and narrow path, and help you resist acts which you may regret later. In times of success and comfort, when you seem to have reached the pinnacle of your career, your commitment to learning will keep you humble, and equip you to anticipate new challenges and grasp precious opportunities for yourself and your organisation.

14. Just as how a prudent sailor would never set sail without his navigation and safety devices, it is my sincere hope that you will embark on your new adventure in the law committed to values which will guide you through safely and purposefully. Should you find your vocation in the law, may it be that at the end of your career, those who know you and have been touched by you will be

able to testify this of you: "*truly, a professional, of a noble profession*".

15. I congratulate all of you once again, and welcome you wholeheartedly into this new family.

16. Court stands adjourned.