

LAUNCH OF THE STATE COURTS HERITAGE GALLERY
19 NOVEMBER 2019, 4.05 PM
WELCOME REMARKS BY THE HONOURABLE JUSTICE SEE KEE OON
PRESIDING JUDGE OF THE STATE COURTS

The Honourable the Chief Justice, Judges of the Supreme Court,
Deputy Attorney-General,
President of the Law Society

Fellow judges and colleagues, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

1. It gives me great pleasure to welcome all of you to the opening ceremony of the State Courts Heritage Gallery.
2. This is the first official event held in the State Courts Towers. Next month, we will move out of our existing premises – the present State Courts Building and commence operations fully in the State Courts Towers. Even as we bid farewell to our former courthouse, the Heritage Gallery forms a key part of our efforts to ensure that our shared heritage is not lost or left behind. The various exhibits in this Gallery provide windows to the past through which we can reflect on, preserve and showcase the transformation journey of the State Courts.

Commemorating Our Past

3. The State Courts comprise the collective body of Courts housed within its premises. Many of these courts have had a long and storied history trailing as far back as the 1800s. It is therefore fitting to launch the Heritage Gallery as part of Singapore's Bicentennial celebrations, marking 200 years since 1819 – the year Sir Stamford Raffles set foot on Singapore's shores. While Raffles is commonly known to have pioneered free trade in Singapore, less frequently mentioned is the role he played in planting the seeds from which our modern judiciary has grown and in fostering the strong culture of adherence to the rule of law that we have in place today. Back in 1819, Singapore had no proper legal system in place for the administration of justice. With much foresight, Raffles recognised the importance of "govern[ing] by law" and establishing a constitution to "ensure [Singapore's] prosperity".¹ Through a set of regulations promulgated in

¹ R.H. Hickling, *Essays in Singapore Law* (Pelanduk Publications, 1992), p 15-16.

1823, Raffles established a two-tier court system, comprising the Resident's Court and the Magistrate's Court and also set out an exposition on the rule of law.² These were crucial building blocks for Singapore's success. As observed by the Honourable the Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, "our commitment to the rule of law resting on a strong judiciary has been pivotal in Singapore's development narrative and its emergence as a modern economic miracle".³

4. The State Courts have played a central role in administering justice and upholding the rule of law. The vast majority of criminal prosecutions and civil and community disputes in Singapore have been and continue to be adjudicated in the State Courts, which are the primary courts of first instance. For many litigants, the State Courts are the first and last port of call in their quest for justice. Today, the State Courts stand at the frontline of our judicial system, handling over 90% of the Judiciary's caseload.
5. The State Courts Heritage Gallery seeks to facilitate better understanding of the contributions made by our courts, as part of our overall efforts to broaden and deepen our engagement with the public and our court users. It is our hope that the Heritage Gallery will raise public awareness of the work and history of the State Courts. In this regard, digital panels feature brief write-ups of selected high-profile cases heard in the State Courts over the last 40 years or so. The cases serve as a testament to the State Courts' important role in dispensing justice and upholding law and order in different periods of Singapore's development.
6. The Heritage Gallery also reminds us of the State Courts' firm and unwavering commitment towards promoting access to justice. We have introduced numerous enhancements and reforms encompassing court fora and infrastructure, case management, alternative dispute resolution, technology, and processes. Today, court users enjoy access to a whole suite of services, focused on providing legal redress and recourse for a broad spectrum of grievances and needs. Some of the major reforms include: the introduction of Small Claims Tribunals in 1985, Night Courts in 1992, Primary Dispute Resolution Centre in 1998 (which became the State Courts Centre for Dispute Resolution in 2015), Community Court in 2008, HELP Centre in 2010 (which became the Community Justice Centre in 2013), and the Community Justice and Tribunals Division in

² <https://lawgazette.com.sg/feature/two-centuries-of-british-rule-of-law-a-look-back-to-1819/> (Kevin YL Tan, *Singapore Law Gazette*, July 2019) (last accessed on 19 November 2019)

³ The Honourable the Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, "The Rule of Law: The Path to Exceptionalism", paper delivered at the American Law Institute's 93rd Annual Meeting (16 May 2016) at paragraph 23.

2015. The wide-ranging enhancements and innovative reforms have positioned the State Courts to keep abreast of our country's socioeconomic development and to fortify our status as a commercial hub.

Appreciating the Present

7. Today, the Singapore Judiciary ranks amongst the best in the world. This year, the World Justice Project ranked Singapore as the top nation in Asia in the "Rule of law" category.⁴ A State Courts user survey done last year found that over 99% of the respondents were satisfied with the services provided by the State Courts and 96% of them found that cases were disposed of in a timely and efficient manner. The Heritage Gallery seeks to commemorate the progress the nation has achieved over the years, and the important role played by the State Courts throughout that journey.

8. To enhance the visitor experience in the Heritage Gallery, many of the exhibits use interactive, technology-enabled features to stimulate the senses and stir the imagination of the viewers. For instance, some of the past cases heard in the State Courts will be re-enacted, through digital displays, in the Heritage Courtroom. The mock hearings will also showcase various technological initiatives that have been implemented in the State Courts over the years, including the transition from the traditional paper-based courtroom to the modern paper-light environment. As our courtrooms have undergone a major architectural overhaul in the State Courts Towers, we have sought to replicate the look and feel of the traditional courtroom in the Heritage Courtroom. To this end, even its Meranti-wood wall-panels were transplanted from the courtrooms in the existing State Courts building. The idea is to recreate an atmosphere where visitors would feel as though they have travelled back in time.

Looking to the Future

9. Finally, the Heritage Gallery showcases the State Courts as a forward-looking judiciary shaping tomorrow's justice. Our milestones and achievements did not simply happen by chance; they were made possible by the collective efforts and dedication of visionary leaders, many of whom are now honoured in the exhibit titled "Leadership Through the Years" found in the Heritage Gallery. We are greatly privileged to have a number of them

⁴ World Justice Project, Rule of Law Index 2019, p 16.

in attendance today, including Mr Michael Khoo SC, Mr Richard Magnus and Justice Tan Siong Thye.

10. On behalf of the State Courts, I would like to take this opportunity to express our deep gratitude to those who have served in our courts for their visionary leadership and selfless contributions, and for playing an instrumental role in envisioning and shaping the State Courts' future.
11. I would also like to express our appreciation to those who have helped turn the Heritage Gallery from idea into reality. I am immensely grateful to the Tote Board and Singapore Press Holdings for their generous sponsorship, and also to numerous partner organisations who rendered invaluable assistance in content development. Last but not least, I wish to extend my heartfelt thanks to all my colleagues who have been working tirelessly alongside the contractors over the last few months to get the Heritage Gallery up and running.
12. Before I conclude, I would like to encourage you to tour the Gallery and immerse yourselves in the experience. You are most welcome (and indeed encouraged) to take as many photographs as you would like. Thank you very much for taking the time to join us today.