

AG Lucien Wong's welcome address for AGC150 Dinner and Dance

Prime Minister (and Mrs Lee), Chief Justice, Ministers, Justices and Judicial Commissioners of the High Court, my fellow AGC colleagues, distinguished guests,

1 It is my honour and privilege to welcome you to the Attorney-General's Chambers' 150th Anniversary Dinner.

Establishment of AGC

2 On 1st of April 1867, some 150 years ago, the office of the Attorney-General of the Straits Settlements was established. As you all are aware, Singapore was part of the Straits Settlements which also included Malacca and Penang.

3 As mentioned just now, our first Attorney-General, Sir Thomas Braddell, was a great lawyer and scholar. Sir Thomas was an Irishman but he left Ireland to look for work in the colonies, like many of his colleagues then. He started his life in Malaya as the manager of a sugar plantation before turning to the law. He was passionate about the interests of the local population. Even before his appointment as Attorney-General, Sir Thomas advocated for Singapore and Malaya to be governed directly as Crown Colonies, not by the East India Company, but as Colonies of London. He envisaged the creation of the Straits Settlements with its own independent legal system, based on the rule of law. And in the 15 or so years that he was the Attorney-General, Sir Thomas personally drafted numerous statutes, including legislation to establish an independent Judiciary.

4 From its first Attorney-General, these Chambers inherited a clear vision and purpose. The people of Singapore were to be governed by clear laws that were accessible to all. Singapore was to have its own independent and impartial Courts, administering even-handed justice. In his own steadfast manner, Sir Thomas laid the groundwork for a Government based on the rule of law in Singapore, and in doing so, he set the bar very high for his successors.

5 After Sir Thomas Braddell, between 1883 and 1959, Singapore had 15 expatriate Attorney-Generals¹. During this period, Singapore flourished as a thriving trading centre. Immigrants from all the world, particularly from Asia, came to Singapore: some looking to escape poverty and hardship in their countries, many seeking economic opportunities here. Underpinning Singapore's attraction was the knowledge that people of all races and religions were held accountable to one law.

6 Of course, the darkest chapter in Singapore's history also occurred during this period. During the Japanese occupation, fear and lawlessness prevailed. Most will not be aware of this, but officers from the Attorney-General's Department as it was then known, and the Supreme Court put their lives at risk to rescue the law libraries and land registration records from destruction during the war. It was due to their bravery and foresight that we still have legal records from the pre-war period today.

Self-government and independence

¹ Excluding three Acting AGs.

7 Some 90 years after the establishment of these Chambers, in 1959, Singapore's first local Attorney-General, Dr Ahmad bin Mohamed Ibrahim, was appointed. Those who worked with him remember him as a quiet, simple and hardworking man of striking intelligence.

8 In 1965, with next to no advance notice, AGC officers were informed that Singapore was separating from Malaysia, or Malaya. Led by AG Ahmad Ibrahim, these Chambers – then comprising just 19 officers, including support staff – set about the colossal task of separation. Our officers were tasked with the drafting, almost overnight, of the many laws that were required for Singapore to function as an independent sovereign state. AGC rose to the occasion. It is a testament to the calibre and acumen of these pioneers, some of whom are with us tonight, that many of the laws drafted in those testing conditions are still in use today.

9 Much of our early history as an organ of state of independent Singapore was shaped by Singapore's longest-serving Attorney-General, Mr Tan Boon Teik. I am happy that his wife, Professor Tan Sook Yee seated in front here, my former law school professor, is with us here tonight. Mr Tan was a remarkable man. He took over as acting AG on 1 February 1967, at just 38 years of age. During his 25-year tenure as AG, these Chambers played a central role in advising and assisting the Government in implementing some of Singapore's most significant policies – including National Service, CPF and HDB, just to name but a few.

10 AG Tan was also a formidable advocate who prosecuted some of the largest cases of his day, including the Gemini Chit Fund case. For those of you who can remember, this was the case involving a company that swindled over \$50 million dollars from some of the poorest people in Singapore – from clerks, cleaners and labourers. As you can appreciate, \$50 million

was a very large amount then. The newspaper described this case as the “Crime of the Century”. Amidst a tense atmosphere where even riot police had to be deployed, AG Tan himself marched to the Subordinate Courts and prosecuted this case personally. It was one of the defining moments of his tenure as AG. AG Tan led by example. He expected a very high standard for his officers, a standard that is still aspired to today.

11 AG Tan was succeeded by AG Chan Sek Keong I am pleased to see AG Chan and his wife, Elisabeth is a long serving AGC officer, here with us today. During the 14 years that AG Chan helmed these Chambers, he established AGC as a force to be reckoned with. Apart from personally leading the AGC team in a number of critical court cases, he also drafted legislation that laid the foundation for an indigenous legal system for Singapore. AG Chan is not just one of Singapore’s finest legal minds, but he is also an outstanding leader. He instituted enduring systems to ensure that the decisions taken by AGC officers were not only legally sound but rigorously considered from all angles.

12 Unfortunately, I only have the time tonight to focus on the achievements of our first 3 Attorney-Generals after independence. So I apologise to those who came after AG Chan. However, it is our good fortune that AGs Chao Hick Tin, Walter Woon, Sundaresh Menon, Steven Chong and V K Rajah followed in the footsteps of these 3 AGs, for all of them have, in their own respective ways, moulded AGC into the premier legal institution that it is today. They built an excellent foundation for us to face the challenges of the future. Since most of them are with us here tonight, just let me take this opportunity to thank them for their service to AGC. Thank you.

AGC's role in safeguarding the rule of law

13 The nation of Singapore is fundamentally built upon a bedrock of the rule of law. Over the course of AGC's history, especially post-independence, we have played a critical role in entrenching the rule of law within the very fabric of our society. As the chief legal advisor to the Government and drafter of laws, we are the institution that advises the Government on how to govern and advance its policy objectives within the framework of the rule of law. As the office of the Public Prosecutor, we are responsible for administering even-handed and fair criminal justice. Today, Singapore is one of the safest and least corrupt countries in the world. The public has confidence in our legal institutions and our system of justice. As recent developments around the world highlight, this is not a natural state of affairs. This was carefully cultivated by the labour of generations of AGC officers who came before us.

14 This is indeed a legacy that we can be justifiably proud of, and we can look to the future with confidence. Today, AGC is home to some of the brightest minds in the country, and I have been impressed by the level of professionalism and dedication to the public service shown by AGC officers.

Looking ahead

15 In the coming years, AGC will have an important role to play in Singapore's governance. Quite apart from technology disruptors, if current events elsewhere serve as any indicator, there will be challenges to the strength of our social fabric and our commitment to the rule of law.

16 We will have to adapt to the changing world by deepening our skills, not just as lawyers but as partners of the Government and protectors of the public interest. We have had a remarkable history, but in order to thrive for the next 150 years and beyond, we must make substantial improvements to the way that we work, leveraging on technology where possible, to achieve the best possible outcomes for the Government and the nation.

17 But our mission will never change. We will always be guided by the core principles that we have adopted over the course of history: namely to uphold the rule of law and to act in the public interest.

18 Over the last 150 years, dedicated officers in AGC have been giving their all to Singapore: diligently serving the public in testing conditions, motivated not by reward or recognition, but by the satisfaction of making a difference to Singapore. It is indeed an honour for me to be a part of this extraordinary institution. I am confident that together, we will uphold the legacy of our predecessors.

19 Our Prime Minister will soon take the stage to deliver his address. I believe this is the first time that the Prime Minister of the day has graced an event of these Chambers, and I am sure all of you are looking forward to hearing from him. I am truly grateful to the Prime Minister for gracing this event. Thank you, and I wish you all an enjoyable evening ahead.
