

MASS ADMISSION DINNER: 5 MAY 2025

Justice Valerie Thean

1. Good evening and a warm welcome. Thank you to SAL for inviting me to speak at this mass admission dinner. Let me first offer my heartiest congratulations to each of our young lawyers on your admission as a lawyer (non-practitioner). And also, on behalf of SAL, thanks and appreciation to senior members of the legal community who have taken time to jointly host dinner for our young colleagues.
2. For young lawyers here with us this evening, this dinner marks the start of your careers. Congratulations. You have worked very hard to get here. And your achievement now rewards you with more hard work. Some of you will go on to training contracts, others may have joined the public legal or judicial services, or be in in-house legal positions. A few may leave the law altogether; but having qualified for admission gives you insight into an important set of values, a special way of life.
3. What do I mean by an important set of values? I refer to the core values of the legal profession: Integrity, Professionalism, and Justice.¹ Integrity we all understand. Integrity gives us value as human beings, enables us to be fine friends, spouses, and neighbours, whether at home, at work, or even in a supermarket queue. And yet, at every turn, we see that it is a rare trait today. Integrity is precious. It is also especially important to those who practise law, because the courts, your clients, your fellow practitioners, depend upon your

¹ Final Report of the Ethics and Professional Standards Committee (co-chaired by Justice Valerie Thean & Mr Jimmy Yim SC) (8 January 2025), p.41 and Annex C.

integrity. A solicitor's undertaking, for example, has been said to be a "cast-iron guarantee, practically a sacred vow".² Integrity speaks to the unique trust that is reposed on lawyers.

4. How about professionalism? This speaks to the diligence and excellence with which trusted lawyers approach their task. And yes, it is hard work. When I was 9, I promised myself I would not be a corporate lawyer, because my father, who was one, appeared to my young mind to work too hard. My bedroom was next to the telephone at home, and too-often I would need to answer that telephone at 2 am in the morning. No one told me that public service is hard work too. But I can tell you that the law is a meaningful career. Well worth the many years of your life.
5. And it is a life you make richer and more rewarding by the relationships you forge. This is all the more important now, because remote working and technology, which make practice more efficient, at the same time, results in lawyers having fewer opportunities to meet. I have heard a lot of nostalgic feedback about how lawyers used to bond, sitting in the bar room, waiting for their hearings. This dinner is an intentional way to give you a good opportunity to meet and mingle with others in the profession. You may meet, in this room, many who will give you wisdom, good cheer, and continued verve for the long years ahead. We have with us tonight senior counsel, our deputy attorneys-general, judges. Take time to introduce yourselves, say hello, ask questions. There is an East African (Luo

² *Law Society of Singapore v Naidu Priyalatha* [2023] 3 SLR 1401 at [1].

tribe) proverb:³ “Alone a youth runs fast, with an elder, slow, but together they go far.”

6. The third value is Justice. This reminds us that the law is not simply a rewarding career, but a call to serve. In the daily grind of the vicissitudes of life, it is lawyers who help to work out what justice and the rule of law looks like for society. Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, in his mass admission ceremony speech two weeks ago, spoke about how, in your differing careers, whether practising law or otherwise, you are still officers of the court, and your work impacts public trust and confidence in legal professionals and in the legal system as a whole.⁴ Our economy, government and society are enriched by the many ways in which legal professionals contribute. Singapore’s history has many examples of great lawyers, as well as lawyers who left the profession to become successful leaders in business, heads of international organisations, diplomats, Ministers, Prime Minister even. And lawyers who left the law to stay at home have imbued their families with these values, which are fundamental to the continued flourishing of society as we know it.
7. My wish for all of you, therefore, is to build great lives, wherever and however you choose to pursue happiness. The wider world is waiting for the path you alone will carve. Whatever path you choose, aim high; aspire to be the best at what you want to be best at. Do it right and do it well, in the best traditions of our profession. Just as you stand on the shoulders of those more experienced in the profession, in time, your juniors will look to you as mentors and guides.

³ Weekly African Proverb, 21 December 2000, AFRIPROV.org.

⁴ Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, speech delivered at the Mass Admission Ceremony 2025, “The Centrality of Trust in the Legal Profession” at paras 20–27.

8. In this context, I must say the venue for tonight is most symbolic, and SAL must be congratulated for choosing it. What better place to build upon tradition than the former Supreme Court building? I had the great privilege to start my career in the law here in this building, as a young law clerk. Some thirty years ago, the building was very old, and not yet restored. Swallows made their nest in the roof rafters, and in the evening hours bird and bat noise discouraged us from working too late. This Supreme Court Terrace and Glass Room is an extension built from a previously cramped area for equipment in the roof of the former building. The central rotunda dome, previously not visible, is now a feature in this new space.
9. The story of this building is a good visual metaphor for the law and its continued relevance. With creative human intervention, the building has become more modern, more beautiful - historical, yet fresh – a work of art that is adding new purpose in our lives. How similar this is to the old story of *Donohue v Stevenson*, where lawyers and judges worked together to light a new path in the common law.
10. And surely, as you, our newest, youngest lawyers join us to give new thought to our ancient craft of practising law, we will, together as a profession, better serve the ends of justice.
11. On that note, my very best wishes for the future, and in the meanwhile, a most enjoyable evening.
12. Thank you.
