

2015 NUS Commencement (13 JULY 2015)

Law School and LKY School of Public Policy

Commencement Address by Tommy Koh

1. I thank Dean Simon Chesterman and Dean Kishore Mahbubani for inviting me to speak at this happy occasion. I extend my warm congratulations and good wishes to the graduands. I have a personal interest in your future welfare because I have been a member of the Faculty of the Law School since 1962. I have also been a governor of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy since its inception.
2. Commencement speeches are very difficult to make. My first commencement speech delivered at an American university, many years ago, was a disaster. The person who invited me was a good friend who taught courses on US foreign policy and Southeast Asia. I asked his advice on what my speech should focus on. He said I should focus on US policy towards Asia. When the commencement ceremony was over, I asked my wife, who was sitting among the graduands, for her feedback. She said she overheard one student saying that my speech was too long. Another student said it was very boring. A third student asked in exasperation, who does he think he is talking to? We are not the United Nations.

3. Talking about the United Nations reminds me of a story told to me by the third Secretary-General of the UN, U Thant from Myanmar. He said that, after a commencement speech he had delivered, several people came up to shake his hand. The parent of a graduate shook his hand and said: “Mr Secretary-General, that was a very important speech. You must have it published posthumously. And do it as soon as possible.”
4. Let me now turn to the law graduands. Lawyers make a very important contribution to the world. That contribution is the Rule of Law. We lawyers believe that all countries should be governed by the rule of law and not the rule of man. We work for a world which is governed by the rule of law instead of the rule that might is right.
5. We believe that no one is above the law and all citizens, irrespective of their race, colour, religion, gender, political orientation, social and economic status, are entitled to the equal protection of the law. We believe that the legal profession is a learned and noble profession. It is not just a service industry. Making money is a legitimate goal but it must not compromise our professional integrity and our ethical code. To make the rule of law a reality and not just an ideal, we must ensure that the poor have access to the legal process and that their rights are not trampled upon by the rich and the powerful. We must also ensure that no accused person, no matter how controversial he is or how heinous his alleged offence, is without counsel. And justice must be tempered with mercy.

6. I urge you to make a solemn promise that you will always use the law to render justice and that you will never use it as an instrument of oppression.
7. I would now like to turn to the graduands of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. I recently did a mental survey of the world in the past 50 years. I was struck by the large number of countries, which had very bright prospects 50 years ago, and which have floundered. Why have those countries failed to live up to their potential? Why are they still stuck in the Third World?
8. To simplify a complex story, I would put the blame on the politicians and the public service. Politicians can make or break a country. It is an unfortunate truth that, in the past 50 years, only a minority of the developing countries have been blessed with honest and competent political leaders. In the majority, the political leaders have been either corrupt or incompetent or both. They have been more interested in furthering their own welfare than the welfare of their peoples. Instead of focusing on the fundamentals and on the long-term, they have focused on doing what is popular and expedient.
9. In many cases, the venality of the political leaders has been matched by the incompetence and corruption of the public service. One of the reasons for Singapore's success is that we have very competent and honest political leaders and public servants.
10. What are my expectations of the graduates of the LKY School of Public Policy? Most of you will join or return to jobs in the public

sector. Some of you will join the private sector or the non-profit sector. Whether you are in the public, private or non-profit sector, I expect you to be committed to promoting the welfare of the peoples of the countries you come from. If you are a public servant or civil society leader, I expect you to be competent, honest and empathetic. If you become an office holder, I hope you will serve your country with all your talent and energy. I hope you will be clean and trust-worthy. I hope you will not be corrupted by power or office but will remain humble.

11.I shall conclude. I have very high expectations of all of you. I hope you will be very successful in your careers. I hope that, in 50 years' time, when you look back on your lives and careers, you can say that you have done your best to make this a better world and have left a positive legacy.

12.Thank you very much.

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