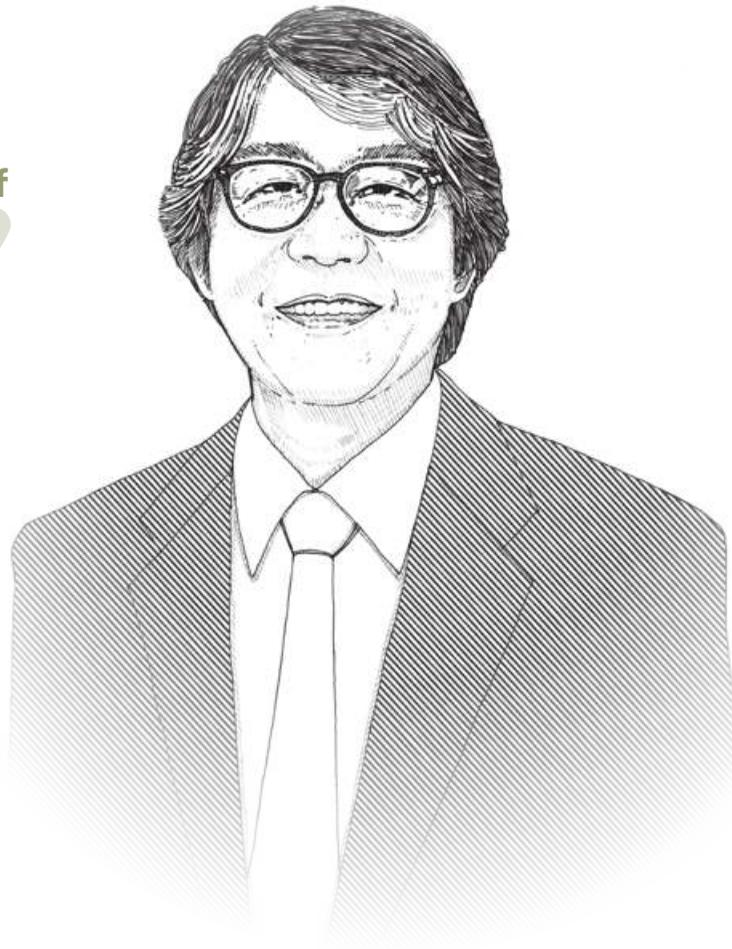




Tommy Koh

The Makings of a Trustworthy City

“Rule of law is one of the most precious achievements of humankind.”



Professor Tommy Koh is Singapore's Ambassador-at-Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Rector of Tembusu College, Chairman of the Centre for International Law, and Special Advisor of the Institute of Policy Studies at the National University of Singapore. He was also Singapore's permanent representative to the United Nations and ambassador to the United States.

A high trust city, however elusive, can be measured and cultivated. Diplomat and international law expert Professor **Tommy Koh** shares why good governance, rule of law and a low level of corruption are key features of a trustworthy city.

Cities and countries share some characteristics with human beings. Some people are trustworthy, while others are not. Likewise, some cities and countries enjoy a good reputation for honesty and trustworthiness, but others have a bad reputation and are not trustworthy.

In this essay, I wish to assert three propositions. First, a high trust city enjoys good governance. Second, a high trust city upholds the rule of law. Third, a high trust city has a low level of corruption.

Good Governance and Trust

I think that there is a causal link between good governance and trust. What do I mean by good governance? I mean a ruler, government or local authority that is clean and competent, and not one that is corrupt or incompetent. I mean an authority that governs the city for the benefit of all of its citizens, and not only some. I mean an administration that delivers to its citizens security, health, education, housing, jobs, water and a liveable environment.

The citizens who enjoy good governance feel empowered. They feel that they live in a fair society. In a fair society, there is a high level of trust between the citizens, and between the citizens and those in authority.

The Rule of Law and Trust

The rule of law is one of the most precious achievements of humankind. It is as important within countries as it is between countries. In a city governed by the rule of law, no one is above the law, and everyone is subject to the law.

In such a city, citizens can feel safe in their homes. They can feel confident that the law will protect them, their properties and their rights. They know that neither the government nor a powerful person can violate their rights with impunity.

Trustworthiness is the result of good governance, the rule of law and low corruption.

They have confidence in their police force, public prosecutor and judges. In a city governed by the rule of law, a police officer will enforce the law strictly but impartially. Then, the public prosecutor will decide whether to prosecute, based upon the facts and the law.

In such a society, the judges are independent and will administer justice without fear or favour. As such, the citizens will have a high level of trust in persons in authority. Citizens, no matter how poor they are, will feel that they are protected by the law and that no one can trample upon their rights with impunity.

No Corruption and Trust

Corruption is a universal disease. It undermines integrity and trust. In a corrupt city, one has to pay a bribe for simple municipal services. In a corrupt city, there is no trust between citizens or between citizens and the authorities. In such a city, everyone is for sale. The policeman, the prosecutor, the judge and the politician are all for sale.

In an uncorrupt city, on the other hand, no one is for sale. Public servants do their duty and serve the citizens conscientiously. In an uncorrupt city, the citizens feel liberated. Consequently, there is a high level of trust between citizens, and between citizens and persons in authority.

The Ideal City

The ideal city is one that enjoys good governance, upholds the rule of law and is uncorrupt. Are there such cities on earth? My answer is yes. There are such cities in the different continents. At the moment, they are probably in the minority. Our ambition should be to make them the majority among cities.

The Honesty of Cities

In 2001, the *Reader's Digest* magazine decided to test honesty in cities around the world through a "lost wallet" test. In each city, 10 wallets containing the local equivalent of US\$10, a name card and a telephone number were deliberately dropped. The aim was to observe how many wallets were returned in each of the cities. The results were reported by Eric Felten in his article "Finders Keepers", published in April 2001.

The test was carried out in 14 Asian cities. The results were as follows:

| CITY | WALLETS RETURNED (OUT OF 10) |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. Singapore | = 9 |
| 2. Incheon, South Korea | = 8 |
| 3. Trivandrum, India | = 8 |
| 4. Kamakura, Japan | = 7 |
| 5. Chiangmai, Thailand | = 6 |
| 6. Seoul, South Korea | = 6 |
| 7. Mumbai, India | = 5 |
| 8. Taipei, Taiwan | = 5 |
| 9. Bangkok, Thailand | = 5 |
| 10. Tainan, Taiwan | = 5 |
| 11. Kajang, Malaysia | = 5 |
| 12. Lapu Lapu, Philippines | = 4 |
| 13. Manila, Philippines | = 4 |
| 14. Hong Kong | = 3 |

This "lost wallet" test is a simple and unsophisticated way of gauging the relative honesty of cities. It is meaningful as a test of the honesty of people in different cities. Over time, cities develop their specific cultures. Some cultures put a higher premium on honesty than others.

In the case of Singapore, I would argue that honesty has become a part of our DNA. Singapore is an example of a high trust city. Its trustworthiness is the result of good governance, the rule of law and low corruption. 