

2022 National University of Singapore Commencement
Conferment of the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws
6 July 2022

Tommy Koh's Acceptance Speech

Salutations

1. Minister Chan Chun Seng
2. Mr Po'ad Mattar and the Pro-Chancellors
3. Mr Hsieh Fu Hua and NUS Trustees
4. Professor Tan Eng Chye and the other members of the NUS Family
5. I will now greet the most important people at this commencement, the graduands and their parents.
6. Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank Simon Chesterman

I would like to begin by thanking Professor Simon Chesterman for his kind oration. I hope my wife will ask him to deliver the eulogy at my funeral.

Congratulate Professor Wang Gungwu

I am very happy that Prof Wang Gungwu is also receiving an honorary degree today. I have admired him since 1957, when I first met him. He is truly a rare Confucian junzi:

a gentleman, a scholar and a man of virtue. Prof Wang is one of the world's most admired historians.

Law, Nature and Culture

In the 8 minutes allocated to me, I would like to speak briefly about the three areas in which I have focused my energy: law, nature and culture. I am confining myself to only 3 points because of my wife's good advice. Her advice is: keep your speeches short and don't make more than 3 points.

Law

I chose to study law, not in order to enrich myself, but to pursue justice and to promote the rule of law. The rule of law simply means that no man and no country is above the law. It means that everyone is subject to the law. It also means that disputes will be settled peacefully, in accordance with the law.

At NUS, I had the honour of serving as the dean of the law school and the founding chairman of the Centre for International Law. My dream that, one day, the NUS Law School would be ranked as one of the top 10 law schools of the world, has come true. The Centre for International Law has also been recognised as one of the best in the world.

At the regional level, I would single out the work I did, as Chairman of the High-Level Task Force, to draft the ASEAN Charter, as the most significant. The Charter complements the ASEAN Way of making decisions and solving problems. The Charter has strengthened ASEAN's institutions and the rule of law. Incidentally, the Charter prohibits military coups.

At the global level, I would point to the work I did, as President of the Third UN Conference on the Law of the Sea, as the most important. The conference has given the world, the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, a treaty which I have described as the constitution for the world's oceans.

I was Singapore's Ambassador to the UN in 1978, 1979 and 1983. In 1978, Vietnam invaded and occupied Cambodia. In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded and occupied Afghanistan. In 1983, the United States invaded and occupied Grenada. On all three occasions, I condemned their actions as a violation of the UN Charter and of international law. The Charter protects the sovereignty, territorial integrity and the independence of states.

For the same reason, I have condemned Russia's unjustified and illegal invasion of Ukraine. My fourth oped on Ukraine appears in the Straits Times today. As a small country, we must speak up whenever a country sends its armed forces, across an international boundary, into the territory of another country without its consent. We must not allow powerful countries to undermine the UN Charter and the rule of law. Our survival will be threatened if the rule of law is replaced by the rule that might is right. What has happened to Ukraine can happen to us. That is why we need NS and the SAF.

Nature and Environment

A second area of my work concerns nature and the environment. In 1990, the UN elected me to chair the preparatory committee for the 1992 Earth Summit, in Rio de Janeiro. At the summit, Brazil, the host country, requested me to chair the main committee of the conference.

The Earth Summit was very successful. Two landmark treaties, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, were signed in Rio. I drafted the Rio Declaration of Principles on Environment and Development. I am happy to report that several of the principles have become part of international environmental law.

In Singapore, I am the patron of the Nature Society. We work harmoniously with the government most of the time but, on rare occasions, against the government. In 1992, we waged a successful campaign to stop the government from cutting down the trees at the Lower Pierce Reservoir, to make way for a golf course. This is an excellent example of the role which a good non-governmental organisation can play.

I am very happy to have helped NUS build a world class museum of natural history. It was a privilege to have helped in founding the Tembusu College, the greenest and most popular college at University Town.

What is my vision? My vision is to live in harmony with nature. My agenda is to promote sustainability in all our endeavours. I support the government's Green Plan and our national pledge to achieve net zero at or around 2050.

Culture and the Arts

With a mother who was an actress, in her younger years, I am probably destined to play a role in the development of culture and the arts in Singapore. I was the first chairman of the National Arts Council and second chairman of the National Heritage Board.

Thirty years ago, Singapore was often criticised as a cultural desert. Today, Singapore is a cultural oasis, with a vibrant art scene. I believe that art is essential to life. During the circuit breaker, many of us survived the isolation by reading books, by listening to music, by watching theatre and dance on our screens and by listening to stories on our radios. The truth is that we do not live by rice or roti alone. We also need nourishment for our hearts. Culture and the arts provide some of that nourishment.

I am glad that I have been able to play a very small part in transforming Singapore, from a cultural desert to a cultural oasis.

Finally, I wish to congratulate all the graduands, who will be receiving their degrees at this commencement. Since they are from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, I will send them my best wishes by reading a poem by the Catherine Pulsifer.

Graduation Day

Graduation day is finally here, your dreams you did pursue.
All your hard work has paid off, we are so very proud of you.
The nights of study, the projects due.
You did them all and more too.

It has all paid off, your studying is done.
We hope you make time to enjoy some fun.
Always remember life is a learning journey.
Keep filling your mind with all that is worthy.

May the happiness you feel today.
Be a feeling you keep as you go your way.
May life be happy and good to you,
And may you find success in all you do.

Thank you.

.....