

**Address by Mr Chan Sek Keong,  
Advisor, SMU Pro Bono Centre; and Senior Judge, Singapore Supreme Court  
At the official launch of the SMU Pro Bono Centre premises  
At the SMU School of Law building  
On Friday, 6 October 2017**

Prof Lily Kong, Provost, SMU, Mr Tan Chong Huat, Chairman of the RHT Rajan Menon Foundation & Managing Partner of RHTLaw Taylor, Wessing, and A/P Goh Yihan, Dean of the SMU Law Faculty, Staff and students of SMU, Ladies and Gentleman.

1. When I was asked a few months ago to be a member of the SMU Pro Bono Centre as an Advisor, I had no hesitation in accepting the honour even though I had not done a single hour of pro bono work in my professional career. The reason why I had not done any pro bono work was that when the conscience of the Bar was sufficiently moved in the 1990s to provide free legal assistance to the poor, the deprived and those who were left behind in the rat race to become successful, I was no longer in a position to become an active participant in this worthwhile endeavour. All I could do was to encourage others, such as the Law Society to do so. This, I did, throughout my long tenure as Attorney General.
2. I am pleased to be here this afternoon (actually I was told I had no choice) to witness the official launch the new premises of the SMU Pro Bono Centre, which will now be financially supported by the RHT Rajan Menon Foundation.
3. Last night, I visited the website of the Pro Bono Centre where I found a statement that in my 2012 Opening of the Legal Year speech that I had announced the establishment of a mandatory pro bono programme for all Singapore law students from 2013. I found the statement somewhat puzzling because I was sure that the Chief Justice did not have the power to establish such a programme. So I asked Dean Goh Yihan to send me a copy of my speech, and this was what I said:

(Extracted from *Response of Chief Justice Chan Sek Keong at the Opening of the Legal Year 2012 delivered on 6 January 2012* - <https://www.supremecourt.gov.sg/news/speeches/response-of-chief-justice-chan-sek-keong-at-the-opening-of-the-legal-year-2012>)

“For many lawyers, pro bono as a social value does not come from nature, but from nurture. In the past decade, there has been an increasing awareness of this in some developed jurisdictions. In 2005, the American Bar Association revised its accreditation standards for US law schools to require that “[a] law [school] shall offer substantial opportunities for ... student participation in pro bono activities”. As of 2011, 21 US law schools have made pro bono work a graduation requirement. In the United Kingdom, a very recent report prepared by the Solicitors Pro Bono Group showed that as of 2010 “at least 61% of all law schools are now involved in pro bono activity”, as compared to 46% in 2006 – an increase of 33%. Australia, following the example set by Canada, has also made great strides in fostering student pro bono involvement.

We should not fall behind these jurisdictions. The Singapore Institute of Legal Education (“SILE”) has proposed, and our two law schools have agreed, to establish a mandatory pro bono programme for LL.B. students from the academic year 2013. A dry run of the programme will be carried out this year. SILE and the SAL will provide funding to start and sustain this project for three years. For foreign qualified students, they will also have to complete pro bono modules either in Part A or Part B of their qualifying exams. I should add that Singapore Management University (“SMU”) J.D. students are required to perform 50 hours of community service attachment at a Voluntary Welfare Organisation or an organisation involved in pro bono and legal aid work.”

4. So, I was right. It was not me but SILE which inflicted this social welfare programme on the SMU law students, with the consent of the Law School. Since its establishment in 2013, the SMU Pro Bono Centre has been instrumental in cultivating the pro bono culture at SMU and in sensitising students to social justice issues. I am told that currently, SMU law students routinely perform much more

than their required number of hours, and often willingly and with a smile on their faces. The launch of the new premises of the SMU Pro Bono Centre today is a testament to how far we have come.

5. I am actually very impressed by the number and scale of the Pro Bono Projects listed in the Website for the year 2017, the number of legal clinics the Centre would run throughout this year, the scope of the legal services, the organisations it would be working with, such as the Braddell Heights Legal Clinic, the Catholic Lawyers' Guild, the Chong Pang Community Club, the Community Justice Centre, the Community Mediation Centre, the Kembangan-Chai Chee Legal Clinics, the Law Society of Singapore – Pro Bono Services Office, the Legal Aid Bureau, the Legal-Help Web Portal, the NTUC U-Care Legal Clinic, the Potters Place Community Service Society Legal Clinic, the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations Legal Clinics and Muslim Law Legal Clinics and finally the Syariah Court. Just last week, a new MOU was signed in this very building between five Community Development Councils (CDCs), the Law Society Pro Bono Services and three universities – including SMU. Under the agreement, law students from the three educational institutions will provide paralegal support at Community Legal Clinics.
  
6. This is a really impressive CV for a new Pro Bono Centre. So, I am just wondering what value I could bring to the Centre and why I was invited to be an Advisor. So, it is really an honour to be associated with the SMU Pro Bono Centre. Perhaps the least I can do is to persuade the RHT Rajan Menon Foundation to provide long term funding to the Centre to further the legal profession's engagement with law students, to inculcate the pro bono spirit within the legal fraternity of which they will become members. I believe that the Foundation is committed to making pro bono work a philanthropic priority across the legal industry. So I am confident that this partnership will further the impressive work that the SMU Pro Bono Centre has already done, and also contribute towards the provision of pro bono services to the community at large.

7. Pro bono legal services represent the highest form of social work that the legal profession can perform in service to the public. Everyone needs some form of legal assistance or advice at one time or another. It is not just free work, but free work for our poor “neighbours” without expectation of any kind of material reward – it is the work of the Good Samaritan. It is free work, given from the heart. But sometimes, I wish that lawyers in the big corporate firms should also give from the purse, as an alternative to giving from the heart. You must remember that a good corporate lawyer is not necessarily the best pro bono lawyer, and he may not necessarily be equipped in temperament and training in reaching out to the needy and the poor.
  
8. I would like to end by congratulating the RHT Rajan Menon Foundation for taking the initiative to fund the work of the SMU Pro Bono Centre. It is a worthwhile cause for everyone involved, the people behind the foundation, the law teachers behind the Centre, the law students, and of course, the deserving consumers of the services provided by the Centre and the students. I hope this collaboration with the Foundation and Centre will endure.

Thank you.

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