



Justice Scalia (left) fielding questions during a dialogue at NUS Law, with Prof Chesterman. PHOTO: NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

Legal minds remember ‘witty’ Justice Scalia

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When US Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia was asked in Singapore why he wrote dissenting judgments since they would not be followed, he quipped he had “given up on the present generation” and wrote for future students of the law.

Justice Scalia, the longest-serving judge on the current Bench of the United States’ highest court, was described as an outsized personality who gave voice to the values of conservative America in the Supreme Court on matters of religion, family, patriotism and law enforcement, among other things.

He died on vacation in Texas on Saturday, aged 79.

Less than a month ago, he came to Singapore under the National University of Singapore’s (NUS) Lee Kuan Yew Distinguished Visitors Programme and gave a public lecture, where he warned against

the dangers of judges acting as moral arbiters, to a packed audience.

He also met Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon and conducted an informal dialogue with students, in which he addressed questions about the death penalty, his achievements in court and legal education.

Describing the judge as intellectually pugnacious, incisive and witty, NUS Law Dean Simon Chesterman said Justice Scalia had “greatly enjoyed his time here and was clearly impressed at what has been achieved”.

“He is also regarded as the justice most effective at using humour,” said Professor Chesterman, citing a Boston University professor who calculated that “Justice Scalia was the funniest justice, earning 1.027 laughs per oral argument”.

“More seriously, Justice Scalia is also regarded by many – including those who disagree with him – as the Supreme Court’s finest writer.”

For instance, noted the dean wryly, Justice Scalia had a wealth of synonyms for the word “rubbish”.

Law student Loh Yi Sheng, 28, who was at the NUS dialogue, said: “He made no pretence about his dislike for left-leaning liberalism. But, until recently, his was an unpopular cause to champion.

“That he was unapologetic about it underscores the integrity of his convictions. By that bent, he brought the gaps in his opponents’ arguments into sharp relief.”

NUS Law vice-dean Eleanor Wong said: “We were shocked and saddened when we learnt of his passing; he was the image of liveliness and vigour, addressed the students’ questions with humour and good grace, and was inspiring to many of them.”

Added Prof Chesterman: “NUS Law was privileged to host Justice Antonin Scalia on his visit to Singapore. His passing is a great loss.”

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NUS LAW DEAN SIMON CHESTERMAN,
on the late US Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia