

S'pore must keep its laws up-to-date to stay competitive: PM Lee

The Republic has distinguished itself from others because of its respected legal system, he says

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SINGAPORE – Noting that “up-to-date, effective but not onerous” regulation has become a new source of economic competitiveness, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong yesterday stressed the need to keep Singapore’s laws and its legal fraternity abreast of developments.

Business is ceaselessly innovating, and globalisation and technology are spawning new business models, noted Mr Lee. For instance, the e-commerce industry crosses borders and requires “sound frameworks” for enforcement and taxation.

Intellectual-property protection

and cyber security remain serious concerns that require clear rules and effective safeguards. At the same time, emerging technologies such as block-chains — distributed databases with continuously growing records — and artificial intelligence call for equally innovative regulatory approaches, said Mr Lee.

“Laws cannot be static, because the world is not static,” said Mr Lee, who was speaking at the official launch of the E W Barker Centre for Law and Business and its namesake bursary.

Mr Lee called on the research institution to continue the endeavours of the Republic’s first Law Minister Edmund William Barker, who together with his colleagues, recognised that the rule of law was the “cornerstone of development”.

He added that Singapore has distinguished itself from competitors because its legal system is respect-

ed and admired domestically and internationally.

This stemmed from the importance that Mr Barker and his colleagues had placed on the rule of law.

In contrast, the rule of law has become empty words in some other countries, with courts being corrupt or compliant, and governments acting arbitrarily, Mr Lee said.

“Or in other cases, the forms of the legal process trump everything, including justice and common sense. Legal redress becomes a theoretical option, but a practical impossibility,” he added.

Singapore’s founding fathers had avoided these pitfalls with an efficient judiciary, and impartial and transparent ways of resolving disputes, among other things, Mr Lee said.

Beyond publishing papers, the E W Barker Centre will have to help Singapore maintain its competitiveness by engaging industry players, policy-makers and businesses at home and regionally to come up with fresh ideas and policy recommendations “that keep (the Republic) abreast of legal developments, so that (it) remains a preferred location for business, for arbitration, for dispute settlements” in Asia, said Mr Lee.

At the event, the National University of Singapore law dean Simon Chesterman noted in his speech that Singapore’s success as a legal hub was based on factors such as the country

increasingly positioning itself as a thought leader in legal debates.

“If Singapore is to be a true global legal services centre, the country needs to be seen as more than a venue for practising law: We need to play an active role in shaping that law,” he said.

As a global research centre, the newly launched institution — previously known as the Centre for Law and Business since 2014 — will promote research and educational opportunities for faculty, students, legal practitioners and business executives.

Plans are afoot to hire new staff and organise a research programme with interdisciplinary workshops and an annual conference. These initiatives will be supported by a S\$21 million endowment fund.

A separate endowment fund of over S\$300,000 will go towards the newly set-up E W Barker Bursary. Up to two bursaries of S\$6,000 each will be awarded to financially needy undergraduates, starting from the coming academic year.

Speaking at the launch, senior counsel Deborah Barker echoed her father’s words at a law seminar in 1967: “I would like to borrow his words and express the wish that the E W Barker Centre for Law and Business will examine the social, political and economic realities that we face today globally, and help to develop solutions that are practical and reasonable.”

‘Singaporeans owe a profound debt of gratitude to E W Barker’

SINGAPORE – By combining legal know-how with political instincts and a human touch, Mr Edmund William Barker came up with practical solutions and contributed to creating and building a prosperous Singapore, said Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong yesterday.

Paying tribute to independent Singapore’s first and longest-serving law minister, Mr Lee traced the Old Guard Cabinet member’s lasting contributions, citing his part in negotiations on the separation from Malaysia, the development of the Constitution, and other key pieces of legislation, such as the Land Acquisition Act.

Mr Barker died in 2001 at the age of 80. He had served as Law Minister from 1964 to 1988, double hatting as National Development Minister between 1965 and 1975. He studied law at Cambridge University on a Queen’s Scholarship together with late founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and his wife Kwa Geok Choo.

He drafted the Separation Agreement, the Amendment Bill for the Constitution of Malaysia, and the Proclamation of Singapore — foundation documents for Singapore’s independence.

“Fifty years later, none of the provisions in the documents have ever been disputed or challenged, not even fundamental provisions such as the guarantees of the Water Agreements,” said Mr Lee at the launch of the E W Barker Centre for Law and Business and a bursary named after the former Law Minister.

“Singaporeans owe a profound debt of gratitude to the draughtsman of their independence, Mr Barker,” Mr Lee added.

During his tenure, Mr Barker had negotiated the Separation with then-Finance Minister Goh Keng Swee and then-Malaysia’s Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Razak.

Mr Barker had been schoolmates with Mr Razak in Raffles College, and



PM Lee Hsien Loong with Singapore’s first Law Minister Edmund William Barker’s wife Gloria at the launch of the E W Barker Centre for Law and Business yesterday. PHOTO: WEE TECK HIAN

this friendship allowed both sides to work out an amicable solution in a “bloodless legal coup”, said Mr Lee.

“They didn’t talk about EQ (emotional quotient) then, but Mr Barker possessed not only a very able legal mind, but also a first-class personality,” he added.

Mr Barker also oversaw the formation and development of the Constitution, and during his term, key safeguards were introduced to protect minority rights, including the Presidential Council for Minority Rights.

“Mr Barker was not just a legal eagle. He had a keen practical and political sense,” said Mr Lee.

For instance, some ministers suggested legislating the “Stop at Two” policy in the 1960s, but he suggested incentivising families instead.

Other achievements included resettling displaced squatters into new public housing, and building hawker centres for peddlers and hawkers relocated after the cleaning up of the Singapore River.

“Therefore, today Singaporeans and tourists enjoy our chicken rice and bak chor mee at affordable prices and in orderly and hygienic conditions. Our hawker stalls sometimes even receive Michelin Stars,” said Mr Lee. **VALERIE KOH**