

## Be wise people, not just smart lawyers: former Attorney-General V. K. Rajah tells NUS law graduates



Former Attorney-General V. K. Rajah noted that many young lawyers would want to emulate apparently successful lawyers and feel the need to assume some of their traits. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

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SINGAPORE - Be yourselves. Embrace competition. Seek a larger purpose.

Former Attorney-General V. K. Rajah dispensed these advice to law graduates from the National University of Singapore (NUS) on Saturday morning (July 8), as he urged them to be not just smart lawyers but more importantly, wise people.

"Try and be lawyers with good heads and good hearts. Be wise lawyers. In Singapore, we have many clever people but not enough wise ones," said Mr Rajah, who stepped down as the AG this January following a career as a Judge of Appeal, a High Court judge and the managing partner of law firm Rajah & Tann.

Speaking at a commencement ceremony that also marked the NUS Faculty of Law's 60th anniversary, Mr Rajah noted that many young lawyers would want to emulate apparently successful lawyers and feel the need to assume some of their traits.

"A word of advice. Don't. Be yourselves. By all means, absorb all the professional lessons but do not blindly absorb all the personal attributes that you witness," he added.

"There are practising lawyers who have changed their identities and become uncaring in seeking to secure their clients' ends. They practise ostensibly within the letter of the law without observing its spirit."

On embracing competition, he said it would be sad "if lawyers still plead for protection from international competition" decades after Singapore started its first law school.

"I do not think that lawyers today have any right to try and deny clients access to the best legal minds available, Singaporean or international," said Mr Rajah, who said he would be returning shortly to private practice without elaborating.

On seeking a larger purpose, he said law firms and lawyers "should not be defined by just billing targets, profits and compensation".

"Unlike the hospitality business, the client is not always right. A good lawyer does not slavishly follow the client's instructions. Instead, he counsels the client to achieve balance," said Mr Rajah, who was from the 1982 batch that included Senior Counsel Davinder Singh and Judges of Appeal Andrew Phang and Steven Chong.

He also urged the graduates not to stay on longer in the legal profession than they have to if they are uninterested as "only those with passion will excel".

"Unhappy lawyers are not just unhappy persons but a lack of commitment can have adverse consequences for others. Find your passion by all means. Today, a law degree opens many doors," he added.

Mr Rajah's comments come even as the third law school here opened in the SIM University earlier this year, amid an oversupply of young lawyers and declining interest in the law profession among youth.

Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon said last year that the number of new entrants to the profession has doubled in the past five years. Last year, 509 new lawyers were admitted to the Bar.

The Straits Times reported on Monday (July 3) of the waning interest in law among university applicants, with 17 per cent fewer applicants at NUS listing law as their first choice compared to last year. For the Singapore Management University, the drop was 22 per cent this year. More students were opting for majors such as computing.

But Mr Rajah assured parents of those who choose to leave the law that their children have not just wasted four years of their lives.

He noted that NUS law graduates have, over the last 60 years, excelled in many different fields beyond the law including diplomacy, high finance, the business world and the arts.

He cited several from the 1961 pioneering class, such as "Mr Chan Sek Keong, the finest legal mind Singapore has known; Professor Tommy Koh, the finest diplomat Singapore has produced; and Mr TPB Menon, Singapore's finest Chancery lawyer until he left active practice".

Mr Rajah described the 1961 batch as the "wise class" that trump the clever in making a difference to society and lives and added that that other batches, including his 1982 cohort, should seek to emulate them.

Eight members of the 1961 class including Prof Koh, who were the inaugural batch of students admitted to the Faculty of Law of the then University of Malaya (now NUS) in 1957, attended the commencement ceremony on Saturday to support the 2017 graduating class and celebrate the faculty's anniversary.

Prof Koh told The Straits Times that he hopes Singapore's very brightest students continue to see law as their first choice for their future.

"A legal education prepares our students not only for a career in the law but for a whole variety of options, the foreign service, business and even the arts," he added.

Among the graduating class of 2017 - over 300 of them - is a team of students who emerged as champions against the University of Queensland in a hard-fought grand final of the 18th International Maritime Law Arbitration Moot on July 5.

Student Douglas Lok, 25, was also named "Best Speaker in the General Rounds". This was NUS Law's fifth win in this competition, with the previous wins in 2000, 2001, 2010, and 2015.

Said Mr Lok: "I am confident that as long as we are willing to work hard and maintain an open mind, we will have long and fulfilling careers regardless of whether we are in or outside of the legal industry."