

# A book on Tommy Koh as he turns 80

## DPM Tharman talks of the 'Tommy Koh blend' at launch of collection of essays on his impact

Danson Cheong

Ambassador-at-large Tommy Koh represented Singapore on the world stage, but was also known as a man of humility and humanity, who made time for everyone.

Associate Professor Robert Beckman of the National University of Singapore's Centre for International Law, recounted an incident when he took a group of students to the United States for a school trip in 1990. They were to meet Professor Koh, then Ambassador to the US.

"One of the students took ill on the plane and almost lost his voice," recalled Prof Beckman. "The Ambassador of Singapore showed up at the hotel, carrying a pot of soup made by his wife for the young law student from Singapore."

He was one of seven friends and former colleagues of Prof Koh who spoke at the launch of a new book, *Tommy Koh – Serving Singapore and the World*, yesterday, a day before Prof Koh turns 80 today.

Containing over 40 essays, it celebrates Prof Koh's achievements and the impact they had on Singapore and the world. The pieces are written by contributors who knew Prof Koh or worked with him.

Prof Koh has had a distinguished career spanning five decades as one of Singapore's leading diplomats.

At the age of 31, the law don was appointed Permanent Representative to the United Nations. He would go on to helm panels such as the Third UN Conference on the Law of the Sea, and the UN Conference on Environment and Development.

He was also chief negotiator for the US-Singapore Free Trade Agreement, and was on the team that successfully argued the case for Singapore's claim to Pedra Branca at the International Court of Justice.

At home, Prof Koh is known for his contributions to the arts and in building a compassionate society. He was founding chairman of the National Arts Council, sat on the Esplanade board and chaired the National Heritage Board.

Prof Beckman said Prof Koh was also someone who had empathy for others, from junior diplomats to cleaning ladies. "He makes everyone feel that they are welcome."

Emeritus Professor Koh Kheng



Professor Tommy Koh blowing the candles with his grandchildren Toby Koh and Tara Koh, and daughter-in-law Tan Su-lyn. In the background are his son Wei Koh (third from left) and other members of his family. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

Lian from the NUS Law Faculty said when Prof Koh was dean from 1971 to 1974, he would make it a point to "know the names of every single law student". There were some 40 students per cohort then. Ambassador-at-large Chan Heng Chee said Prof Koh helped Singapore "establish a model of diplomacy" that diplomats continue to adhere to today.

Mr Arun Mahizhnan, Special Research Adviser at the Institute of Policy Studies which Prof Koh once led, said he was someone who was not afraid to voice his thoughts on issues like capital punishment, artistic freedom and the environment.

The book launch at the Ritz-Carlton Millenia was attended by some 200 guests, including Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills) Ong Ye Kung, and members of the arts community.

Mr Tharman said Prof Koh had succeeded in advancing Singapore's interests and earned the trust of the international community because of a distinctive mix of qualities, which he called the "Tommy Koh blend". He described this as "your standing by the interests of Singapore as a small country, your ability to master and synthe-

size the most complex facts in a negotiation, and equally too your humility, and the disarming way in which you win people over."

The event was capped off with a birthday cake, and actress Selena Tan led guests in a birthday song.

Prof Koh told *The Sunday Times* he was bowled over by the praise. "I'm lost for words," he said. "We need someone to criticise me to balance this, maybe my wife should've spoken," he added with a chuckle.

The book is available at bookshops for \$36 (excluding GST).

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