

**CITATION BY PROFESSOR SIMON CHESTERMAN,  
DEAN, FACULTY OF LAW,  
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE  
PUBLIC ORATOR FOR SPEAKER OF PARLIAMENT  
MADAM HALIMAH YACOB  
RECIPIENT OF HONORARY DOCTOR OF LAWS**

**NUS COMMENCEMENT 2016 MAIN CEREMONY  
MONDAY, 7 JULY 2016, NUS UNIVERSITY CULTURAL CENTRE**

Your Excellency Dr Tony Tan Keng Yam, President of the Republic of Singapore and Chancellor, National University of Singapore

Madam Halimah Yacob, Honorary Graduatand

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Mdm Halimah Yacob is a leader and an inspiration. She is a trailblazer who remains modest to a fault.

As what President Tan Chorh Chuan just said, she has a string of firsts attached to her name:

- First Malay woman to be elected an MP in 2001.
- First woman to be elected Speaker of Parliament in 2013.
- First Singaporean to be elected to the governing body of the International Labour Organisation.

Yet when I phoned her up to ask whether she would be willing to accept this honour today, her first response was: "Are you sure? There must be many people more deserving than me."

No, Mdm Halimah, there are not.

So please allow me to embarrass her with just a few words about her background, and her many contributions as a leader and as an inspiration.

Mdm Halimah was educated at Singapore Chinese Girls' School and Tanjong Katong Girls' School, before heading to what was then the University of Singapore. There, she completed a Bachelor of Laws degree on a Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) bursary, and later secured a Master of Laws degree also from NUS.

She was subsequently admitted to the bar to practice, but her real passion was labour. After graduating, she joined the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) and served variously as director of the women's development secretariat and of

its legal services. She later rose to become NTUC deputy secretary-general, and after that, she was also elected to the governing body of the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

In addition to her role within NTUC and the ILO, she has served on various boards including the Housing and Development Board, the Tripartite Alliance on Fair Employment Practices, the Tripartite Workgroup on Enhancing Employment Choices for Women, and Mendaki Sense.

Within government, she served as Minister of State at the Ministry of Social and Family Development and the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, as well as chairing the Jurong Town Council.

And as we have heard, in 2013 she was appointed Speaker of Parliament. As Speaker, she presides over parliamentary proceedings and enforces rules to ensure that business is conducted in an orderly manner.

In the English tradition from which the position derives, a new Speaker, when appointed, is “dragged unwillingly” to the position. That appears to be because one function of the Speaker was to communicate the views of parliament to the monarch. Historically, if the monarch was displeased by what he or she heard, it could result in a swift death. Indeed, between 1394 and 1535, no fewer than seven Speakers were beheaded.

Happily, Singapore being a republic, the role includes no such perils and Mdm Halimah appears to have accepted the post willingly. Indeed, she was re-elected to the position earlier this year and continues to fulfil the role with distinction.

It is the nature of many trailblazers who have marked up as many firsts as what Mdm Halimah had to be known not only for what they do, but also for what they represent. In this way, Mdm Halimah has not only made a difference to the many people whose lives she has touched as a labour leader and as a politician, but also those whom she has inspired — to see themselves as not defined solely by their class, their gender, their race, or their religion.

Her work at the ILO, for example, gave her a platform to speak on labour issues not just in Singapore but worldwide.

Her status as one of Singapore’s most influential women is recognised in awards from *Her World* magazine and AWARE, as well as in her induction to the Singapore Women’s Hall of Fame in 2014.

Her role within the Malay and Muslim community was recognised in 2001 with the award of the *Berita Harian* “Achiever of the Year”.

She has continued to be an inspiration, but also an inspiring voice. Last year, for example, she spoke out forcefully against the distortion of Islam offered by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). At the same time, she warned, it is easier to drop bombs rather than build ideas. Building ideas requires effective communication, and she exhorted in particular today’s young “digital natives” to use their creativity and skills to craft positive messages to displace the lies of ISIS.

For NUS' part, Mdm Halimah continues to have strong ties. In addition to being one of our most distinguished alumnae, she served as a member of the NUS Board of Trustees from 2006 to 2011. She embodies and continues to demonstrate many of the qualities we seek to cultivate in all our students: diligence and ambition, but also compassion and a commitment to public service.

Mr Chancellor, for her service, for her leadership, and for her inspiration, may it please you to confer on Mdm Halimah Yacob the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws.