

# New CJ maps out his vision for the judiciary

CJ Chan wants to strike balance between efficiency and justice, and improve relationship with the Bar

► Elena Chong

WITH the backlog of cases in the courts cleared, the new Chief Justice wants to focus on the basics of judicial decision-making and to find the proper balance between justice and efficiency.

CJ Chan Sek Keong mapped out his vision for the judiciary at a 35-minute event at the Supreme Court auditorium yesterday to welcome him.

It was attended by about 480 guests, including Deputy Prime Minister S. Jayakumar and Ambassador-at-large Tommy Koh.

CJ Chan said in his speech that efficiency was vital in court administration but it "should not be pursued to the point where it starts to yield diminishing returns in the dispensation of justice".

Noting that the "fearsome" backlog of cases which had prompted a slew of court reforms had been cleared, he said: "We should now be confident enough to give greater emphasis to the basics of judicial decision-making without the recurrent fear of a resurgent backlog."

Added CJ Chan: "But these observations are not intended to deny the significant contributions of Chief Justice Yong Pung How to the development of Singapore law during his tenure."

One of retired CJ Yong's greatest achievements was introducing technology and management processes to erase a 1991 backlog of 2,000 cases, which would have taken nearly six years to clear.

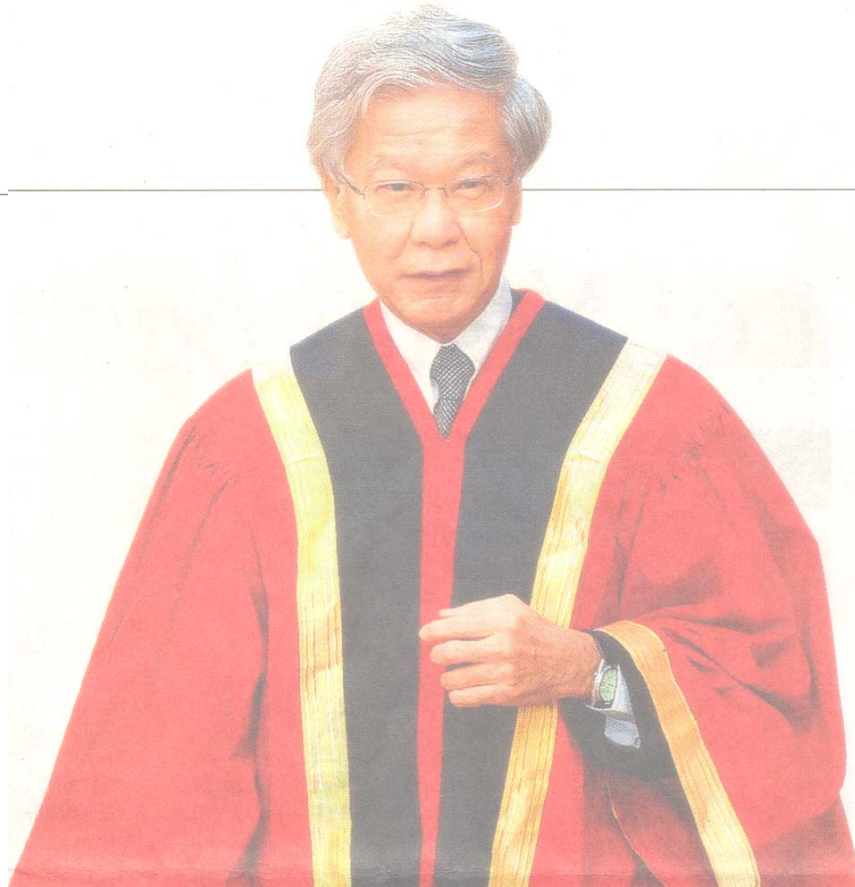
The new Chief Justice, who was sworn in on April 11, also outlined some aspects of the legal system he wanted to pay attention to.

These include: the administration of justice, the administration of the courts and the judiciary's relationship with the Bar.

On the administration of justice, he said there was a need to find the balance between justice and efficiency.

He said: "Whilst court disputes should be disposed of in a timely manner, no litigant should be allowed to leave the courtroom with the conviction or feeling that he has not been given a fair or full hearing because it was done hurriedly."

"Hence, it is important that the Judiciary get the balance right if litigants are to have confidence in the administration of justice."



'All eyes are said to be on the judiciary and the direction I will take. Indeed, even my gardener has remarked that four million pairs of eyes are now on the judiciary'

— CJ CHAN (left)

PHOTO: LIM SIN THAI

On the administration of the courts, he said efficiency will continue to be the norm and he has asked Justice Lee Seiu Kin and a team of IT-savvy lawyers to reconfigure the existing Electronic Filing System into a more sophisticated Electronic Litigation System. It will provide real-time alerts when there are delays in a case, so that these can be dealt with.

There would also be no let-up by the courts on criminal justice, he said. A panel will be set up to review how sentencing and bail guidelines can be further rationalised and improved, he said.

CJ Chan also touched on what he called the uneasy relationship between the Bench and the Bar in the last few years. It was necessary to start a new chapter in their relationship, he said.

"There should be less stress in litigation if counsel give no cause to the judiciary to make litigation stressful."

He also spoke about young legal talent turning away from general litigation due to the stress.

Drawing laughter, he said: "I assure the Bar that young lawyers who appear before me and my fellow judges should not feel stressed and should have no fear of being stressed."

CJ Chan also supported an idea by Law Society president Philip Jeyaretnam to enthrone young lawyers to love the law by encouraging pro bono work.

Judicial Commissioner Sundaresh Menon will advise the society in devising programmes to promote legal work done without charge for poor clients.

Lawyer P.E. Ashokan, a partner in KhattarWong, said it was one of the most delightful speeches he had heard in a long time.

"It was full of substance with humour injected at appropriate time. The message was well understood by everybody who attended."

Mr Jeyaretnam said he was heartened by the judicial philosophy expressed by the CJ in his speech and the reception from the Bar.

Senior Counsel Tan Cheng Han, dean of the Law Faculty at the National University of Singapore, thought it was an excellent speech.

"Clearly the CJ wants to focus on the development of Singapore law and wants it very much to be more widely accepted within the region," he said.

"I really think we have a good chance of making Singapore law one of the preferred laws for regional commercial transactions."