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Opening of the Legal Year 2026 - Speech by the Attorney-General Lucien Wong S.C.

Speeches

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12 January 2026

May it please Your Honours,

Chief Justice,

Justices of the Court of Appeal,

Judges of the Appellate Division,

Judges and Judicial Commissioners,

1. Two legal instruments concluded some two hundred years ago lie at the foundation of modern Singapore. The first is the so-called 1824 Crawfurd Treaty, which effected the cession of the island of Singapore and its surrounding islands and waters to the East India Company in perpetuity. The second, which followed shortly after the Crawfurd Treaty, is the Second Charter of Justice 1826, which established the modern legal and judicial system in Singapore. This year, 2026, is therefore a significant year for the legal community as it marks the bicentennial of the Second Charter, which united the disparate communities in Singapore at that time under one Law, one Court, and one unwavering commitment to Justice and Right. The Second Charter conferred on the newly-established Court "full Power and Authority ... to give and pass Judgement and Sentence according to Justice and Right". The term "Justice and Right" was interpreted by the Court to mean English law, hence the Second Charter was responsible for the importation of English law into Singapore. In a sense, the Second Charter was not only the cornerstone of our legal system, but also a milestone in the birth of our nation.

2. Speaking personally, this is also a significant moment for me. This is my tenth year in office and my ninth appearance before your Honours at the Opening of the Legal Year. It is therefore opportune for me, on behalf of the Attorney-General's Chambers ("**AGC**") and the Legal Service, to reflect on where we have come from, where we are now, and where we are to go next.

Legacy – where we have come from

Your Honours,

3. Let me start with where we have come from. But first, for the benefit of those present this morning (in particular, our overseas guests) who may not be familiar with how AGC is structured and the work we do, I should provide some background information on AGC. Within AGC, we have four divisions – namely, the Crime Division, the Civil Division, the Legislation Division, and the International Affairs Division. Our prosecutors in the Crime Division conduct criminal prosecutions on behalf of the State; officers in the Civil Division advise the Government on civil law matters and, together with the Advocacy Group in AGC, represent the Government in litigation before the Singapore courts; our drafters in the Legislation Division write our laws; and finally the international lawyers in the International Affairs Division advance and protect Singapore's interests through international law.

4. All Legal Service Officers ("**LSOs**") are employed by the Singapore Legal Service Commission (which is chaired by the Attorney-General) and there are more than 620 LSOs today. There are approximately 400 LSOs at AGC, making AGC the largest law firm in Singapore. Outside AGC, there are approximately 220 LSOs who serve as legal advisers, policy experts and regulatory officers in ministries and statutory boards.

5. You can gauge for yourself the variety of work performed by AGC and the Legal Service. We are not just prosecutors at AGC, but we are also the Government's law firm and Parliamentary draftsmen. In a single day, I may have to put on the hat of a prosecutor, an adviser to the Government, a legislative draftsman and an international law adviser. I can well understand why one of my esteemed predecessors, Mr Chan Sek Keong (who subsequently became Chief Justice), at his AGC farewell dinner in 2006 described his role as Attorney-General as the most fruitful period of his professional life up to that point, although he candidly said that it was not the most enjoyable, given the incessant demands of the role.¹ I could not agree more with Mr Chan's sentiments. In fact, I am reminded that in his speech at the Opening of the Legal Year 2017, my immediate predecessor Mr VK Rajah cited a renowned Attorney-General of England and Wales, Sir Patrick Hastings (who was Attorney-General from 1924 to 1926). Sir Patrick commented that the role of Attorney-

General was his “idea of hell”. I am somewhat inclined to share Sir Patrick’s sentiments – my time as the Attorney-General has been every bit as challenging and stressful as (if not more than) my time in private practice. However, when I feel overwhelmed, I will recall the words famously attributed to Sir Winston Churchill, who was reported to have said during Britain’s darkest days in the Second World War that “If you are going through hell, keep going”.

6. In my first address before your Honours in 2018, I spoke of how privileged I was to inherit what was already a premier legal institution with a legacy of integrity, service, and excellence.² Each Attorney-General, and indeed each LSO, builds on the work of those who have come before. I think a good example of this is our statute book, which bears the imprints of successive Attorneys-General.

7. In 1982, the Law Revision Commission was set up under the leadership of Attorney-General Tan Boon Teik (he was our longest serving Attorney-General) to prepare revised editions of Singapore’s laws in order to consolidate amendments, correct errors, and remove spent or obsolete provisions. In 2013, then-Attorney-General Steven Chong launched the Plain Laws Understandable by Singaporeans project to encourage the use of plain English to make our laws more accessible to all Singaporeans. In 2015, during the tenure of then-Attorney-General VK Rajah, a core group of AGC officers started laying the groundwork for a universal revision of our laws, thirty years after the last universal revision in 1985. This universal revision was a mammoth task that involved the review of some 500 Acts of Parliament (spanning 27,000 pages). The review was to make these Acts more readable, weed out obsolete provisions, and bring consistency and clarity to our laws. (The revision started under Mr VK Rajah and unfortunately ended up with me doing the brunt of the work.) The revision was completed under my tenure and in December 2021, the 2020 Revised Edition of Statutes was published, making it the first revised edition of our statutes published both online and in print. This effort has continued with the recent publication of the 2024 and 2025 Revised Editions of Subsidiary Legislation.

8. This example, and many others that I do not have the time to cover, show how the work of the Legal Service progresses steadily through succeeding generations. It is by standing on the shoulders of giants that we see further and reach farther. But this does not mean that we will rest on our laurels. Quite the contrary. I am conscious that to inherit this rich legacy is also to take on the responsibility of stewardship.

Stewardship – where we are now

Your Honours,

9. At the start of my second term in 2020, I pledged my commitment, and that of my senior leadership team, to the “continued stewardship of AGC”³ as we discharge our mission to be the guardian of the public interest and steward of the rule of law.

10. 2025 was very much business as usual in that respect. It was a busy year, and I will just cite a few notable examples of the work performed by LSOs last year: As the nation went to the polls last May to elect its Fifteenth Parliament, LSOs provided legal support 24/7 for the entire period of the hustings leading up to polling day. Outside the elections, our prosecutors continued to step up efforts to fight the scourge of crime, especially the growing menace of scams. We have also taken robust positions in other areas like drink driving, child abuse, and animal abuse cases, ensuring that the criminal justice system works to protect the vulnerable and defenceless. Further, LSOs, together with other officers in the Legal Aid Bureau, processed about 8000 legal aid cases, helping those suffering from family violence, marital problems, mental incapacity, personal injuries, and unfair dismissal, helping them to find legal redress.

11. However, the work of stewarding the rule of law also takes other forms. One is through building links with like-minded foreign counterparts to share best practices and discuss how best to tackle the challenges of the day. In September last year, we hosted the 30th International Association of Prosecutors Conference. Over 450 delegates,

including 50 Attorneys-General and Prosecutors-General, from 90 countries and jurisdictions were in Singapore to discuss the challenges of combating crime in a world today where offenders make use of technology, innovation and efficient organisation to commit and conceal their misdeeds. This July, we will host the Commonwealth Association of Legislative Counsel Conference where delegates will similarly engage in deep discussions on how legal drafters can meet the challenges of an evolving legal and socio-political landscape while upholding core drafting principles and practices.

12. Another way that we have stewarded the rule of law is through our efforts in legal education. For example, in October 2025, a team of LSOs came together to write the first casebook on biomedical ethics cases in Singapore. The casebook was the initiative of the late Richard Magnus (who as most of you would know was a senior Legal Service Officer who had contributed much to the Legal Service). He was the Chairman of the Bioethics Advisory Committee, which is an independent national advisory body established by the Singapore Cabinet to examine and develop policy recommendations on issues arising from human biomedical science and research. Sadly, Richard passed away in 2022, before the publication of the casebook. The casebook is the distillation of decades of jurisprudence, and the Legal Service's contribution to the biomedical community.

Duty – where we are going to next

Your Honours,

13. That brings me to where we are to go next. This invariably involves the subject of artificial intelligence (or "**AI**"). Since the release of ChatGPT at the end of 2022, AI has dominated the news cycle and touched many aspects of our lives. The legal industry is no exception. And the Legal Service is not spared either. In fact, I have often been asked if AGC adopts AI in our work – and the answer is an emphatic yes. Today, AGC officers already have access to a suite of commercial AI tools, such as Harvey. However, because of reasons of national security and the unique nature of AGC's work, our needs cannot be

met by commercial products alone. For that reason, there exists within AGC a unit which we call the Legal Technology and Innovation Office (or “**LTIO**”). This unit comprises full-time technical IT experts and practising lawyers with technology expertise. LTIO has been instrumental in studying, implementing, and even developing the use of AI and other technology tools which are tailored to the needs of officers at AGC. Through the efforts of LTIO, LSOs have been using several inhouse AI-tools in their daily work.

14. I just give three examples:

a. CaseEdge began as a judgment summariser, but it will soon be improved to become an effective research assistant that will not only retrieve relevant precedents but also answer legal questions accurately.

b. “Prollie” is an AI chatbot trained on AGC’s knowledge management database to generate insightful answers to questions on criminal law and procedure.

c. Cadet is a treaty analyser that reviews Singapore’s commitments across our international agreements to help assess the international litigation risk of proposed government policies touching on these agreements.

d. Apart from these three products, our prosecutors have access to a suite of AI-powered tools to assist, for example, with the drafting of replies and representations from accused persons and statements of facts for simple plead-guilty cases; and our legal drafters and treaty negotiators are also experimenting with tools that will help them draft explanatory statements to Bills, review contracts, and draft treaties.

15. The aspiration is that the Legal Service will be more than AI-literate. The aim is for all LSOs to be AI-fluent. That said, while AI is already changing the face of legal practice, it will not change the core identity of a lawyer, which is to be a **trusted counsellor and faithful advocate**. Most of the time, clients turn to lawyers not because

they want to know *what the law says*, but because they want to know *what to do*. For that, ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini are not good enough. You need a trained professional who applies reason, experience, and discernment to help you find the way forward.

16. As lawyers, we place our client's interests above our own and advocate for him or her. But this does not mean always saying "yes". Sometimes, it may mean saying "no". This is why lawyers are given "instructions", and not "prompts". The lawyer is not there to be a frictionless instrument of the client's will, or a mere mirror to his or her desires, but is a trusted and loyal adviser and champion. The very best lawyers know their clients' needs better than the clients themselves. They make their clients feel seen, known, and understood; they discern the true concerns lying behind their clients' queries; and they explore the underlying interests behind hardened positions to identify potential trade-offs and win-win outcomes across issues. AI may be able to answer your questions, but it cannot tell you when you are asking the wrong question. And that is why I think there is still a place for lawyers in an AI world.

17. What I have just said is also true for our LSOs. The truly hard question in government lawyering is not "what does the law say?" Or even, "what can be done?" Rather, the key questions are: "Should this be done?" "Would it be good?". And more importantly, "Would it be in the public interest?" Often, these are questions of policy for the client to answer. But the task of the Legal Service is to guide our clients with sound legal advice and clear thinking to confront the choices to be made by them.

18. And that this is why, as we look ahead and prepare the Legal Service for an AI-powered future, I am convinced that the process of professional formation of an LSO remains as vital as ever. That will still involve hard work to learn the technical skills of a lawyer and how to use AI; but, more so, it involves knowing the business of Government and immersion into a world of professional values. It is therefore important for us in the Legal Service to focus on passing to the next generation of LSOs two things: (i) the values that are central to the legal profession (such as fairness, honesty, integrity, honour,

service, discipline, and hard work) and (ii) the skills which are uniquely human (such as interviewing a witness, forensic cross-examination in Court, and negotiating with a counterparty). These values and skills cannot be replaced by AI, although perhaps they can be assisted by it.

19. Let me put this in a more personal way. I came into the world of lawyering in the late 70s. It was a time of wharves, barges and coolies along the Singapore River (I still remember the smell of the Singapore River in those days), it was also the time of corded phones, and carbon paper, when I spent endless hours poring over documents and dotting every "i" and crossing every "t" in wet ink. Do I miss that world? In some ways, yes, because life then was simpler and slower. But in many ways, no. Do I think a person needs to stay up into the wee hours like I did marking up documents to be a lawyer? The answer is obviously "no" in today's context. But I believe that to be a good lawyer (particularly, a public lawyer), you need *to be a person who is willing to do that* – a professional who takes his or her work and client's interests seriously enough to do what it takes to do the job well. That is not asking a person to work longer hours, but to work with greater intention. This is my expectation for all LSOs. On a lighter note, I am still haunted by my days of proof-reading documents – up to today, I tend to proof-read the menus at restaurants. I guess this is an occupational hazard which I will have to live with for the rest of my life but which younger lawyers will be spared as (for better or worse) AI will now be bearing the brunt of proof-reading.

Conclusion

Your Honours,

20. To conclude, the past 200 years of our legal history have seen us evolve from a trading post of the East India Company to an independent and sovereign State. Through it all, we have kept faith with the foundational principle articulated in the Second Charter that we are a nation governed by the rule of law. AGC and the Legal Service will continue to

remain true to our vision and we will strive to ensure that the foundational principle of the Second Charter is respected and adhered to by everyone for the foreseeable future.

21. In closing, please allow me to congratulate the following persons:

- a. Justice Steven Chong on his re-appointment as a Justice of the Court of Appeal.
- b. Justice Ang Cheng Hock and Justice Hri Kumar Nair on their appointments as Justices of the Court of Appeal.
- c. Justice Alex Wong, Justice Christopher Tan, and Justice Kristy Tan on their appointments as Judges of the High Court.
- d. Justice Christopher Tan on his additional appointment as the Presiding Judge of the State Courts.
- e. Judicial Commissioner Sushil Nair and Judicial Commissioner Low Siew Ling on their appointments to the Bench. I wish to thank in particular Judicial Commissioner Low for all her invaluable contributions to AGC. She was a trusted colleague at AGC and I have always enjoyed working with her. We shall certainly miss having her with us at AGC.
- f. (Last but not least) Justice David John Goddard and Justice Sir Nigel Teare on their appointments as International Judges.

22. I would also like to congratulate Ms Lisa Sam for completing her term as the President of the Law Society, and Professor Tan Cheng Han on his election as the next President. We look forward to working with Professor Tan and the Bar.

23. We bid farewell to Justice Vincent Hoong, who retired from the Bench at the end of 2025. Justice Hoong began his career in the judiciary in the then-integrated Legal Service,

which comprised both judicial and legal service officers, before serving in various positions in the Legal Service until his appointment to the High Court in 2019. Justice Hoong has given his professional life to public service, and we are grateful for His Honour's steadfast commitment to fairness and his judicious leadership as the Presiding Judge of the State Courts for the past five years.

24. We also remember the late Justice Warren Khoo who sadly left us last year. Warren joined AGC in 1970 and rose to become the head of the Civil Division before leaving for private practice from which he was appointed to the High Court in 1991. He was well known for his compassion, integrity, intellect, and commitment to service. He is an inspiration to LSOs and the wider legal community and we mourn his passing.

25. Finally, on behalf of the Legal Service, I pledge my fullest support to your Honours in the discharge of your constitutional duty to administer justice and extend to your Honour, Chief Justice, and all Judges and members of the legal community our very best wishes for the year ahead.

[View the infographic for key highlights ↗](#)

[1] Singapore Law Society Law Gazette, In Service of Justice and Fairness (Interview of Mr Chan Sek Keong by Professor David Tan), August 2025.

[2] AG Lucien Wong, Address at the Opening of the Legal Year, 8 January 2018, paras 3 and 7.

[3] AG Lucien Wong, Address at the Opening of the Legal Year, 6 January 2020, para 26.

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