

A Short Tribute to Michael Hwang and Past Presidents

I have inherited the last five months of Michael Hwang's term. I have also inherited a legacy from dedicated people, the last of whom is Michael.

Michael brought to the Presidency an intellect and energy that are simply difficult to describe. Known for his wide knowledge of many areas of law, Michael also had an abiding and passionate interest in the Rule of Law, Pro Bono and the Administration of Criminal Justice. These were issues he pushed strongly while President, sometimes to the extent of leaving himself opened to criticism. But Michael meant no harm. He simply believed in what he wrote.

Michael also did not spare himself when it came to devoting time to his position. It was not unusual to receive e-mails and sms from him after midnight. On occasions, he would rush from the airport to attend Council meetings on the same day. We joked that Michael loved his sessions with Council so much that he would sometimes deliberately keep us till 11.00 pm (despite commencing the meeting at 5.15 pm). He would only shorten his meetings if he had an opera to attend – his other great love.

It is perhaps too early to judge Michael's performance, although I have no doubt that Michael has kept to the President's tradition of devotion to duty. So if I may, I would like to say a few words about two other past Presidents, as time has allowed us to better assess their contribution. If I miss any names in what I say here, I trust those whom I fail to mention will forgive me. They had also devoted their time to the profession, but space constraints do not permit me to do justice to all. And I have a purpose for highlighting just these two Presidents – I do want to encourage other members of the profession to step forward and to bring the Society to a new height.

So I want to look at the President who recommended that the Society purchase its own premises. The President was Ms Phyllis Tan. She had largely a Council committed like her to looking into the future stability of the Society. So they took the bold step of putting a resolution to the members for the purchase of premises. The proposal was defeated. This was in 1979. It was rather sad (I guess I now have the advantage of hindsight), as it was the right thing to do, given what we now know of property prices. That Council, led by its President, was bold and forward looking. That Council was not afraid to do something that was unpopular.

Then we move on to the Presidency of Chandra Mohan K. Nair. He also believed in the need for the Society to have its own premises. He was also acutely aware of the proposal having been previously defeated by the members. So this time round, the Council worked very hard to get its message across, well before the AGM called to vote on the resolution. This time the resolution was passed. This was in 1995.

Why do I want to talk about these two Presidents and their Councils, especially when the events took place so long ago? I do so because I fear that we are in danger of losing the great spirit of days gone by. Those Council members were forward-looking and had the courage to persevere in achieving what they believed in for the good of the Society.

But what Chandra Mohan learnt from the experience of Phyllis Tan was that it is always necessary to plan your battles. Victories do not always come easily. In the case of the premises, it took 16 years for the mood of members to change. I do not think we have such a luxury today. So it is my fervent hope that:

- (a) members will continue to contribute to the Society, and support me and the Council when we dare to be bold and bring in innovations for the benefit of the Society;
- (b) members will question me and the Council if we fail to be bold and to strike out when necessary; and
- (c) members will continue to give their time to the Society and participate in such programmes like Pro Bono, and other worthwhile programmes, especially those that are of benefit to the less fortunate members of our country.

Now, a few words of what I hope to achieve. In the next five months I hope to begin the process of revamping the management structure of the Secretariat. More attention needs to be paid to the financial well-being of the Society. So for a start, we have hired an accountant to be our CEO. Purists may shudder at this, but we need to understand our priorities. With a trained accountant we will also have better financial planning. I would also want to have a closer look at how the Secretariat works, and if necessary, make revamps. The Secretariat is the Civil Service of the profession, and like the country's Civil Service, it must always stay relevant and ahead of the game. The Secretariat retains the collective memory of the Society and the profession.

I will also want to look into how we can work better with the Singapore Academy of Law ("SAL"). We all know that we do not possess the financial strength and other resources that SAL has, so we have a disadvantage there. We of course, also need to look into how better we can work with the Ministry of Law (the "Ministry") in this fast-changing legal landscape. I want to assure members that our relations with both SAL and the Ministry are very good, and SAL and the Ministry have been helpful at every turn.

Finally, I want to look into how Council works as a team. At the moment Council members look into and decide on everything that seeks to be decided by Council. This is inefficient, and because of the limited time given to decide on some issues, it is inevitable that not all Council members (who have their practices to look after) can give their full attention all the time to all issues. So it is time to look into this most basic issue of how Council deliberates and decides on the issues put before it.

These are still early days, and we are likely to make mistakes. So I ask members to be patient and to give me and the Council time to make the changes. The good results will not be obvious immediately, but I do hope that by the end of the year we will have something reasonably substantial to report.

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