



New CJ a man of fair judgment

Chan Sek Keong held in high regard by legal fraternity; gem of a person, says ex-judge

► **Melissa Sim**

THE law can take on an angry, harsh or charitable face, but a judge's ability to strike a balance can make a person feel he is being heard, said Senior Counsel K.S. Rajah.

Attorney-General Chan Sek Keong, 69, he said, has that ability.

After some 14 years in the A-G's Chambers, he takes over as Chief Justice on April 11 for a three-year term. He steps into the shoes of CJ Yong Pung How, 79, who is retiring.

Born in Ipoh, Mr Chan received his early education at Anderson School, Ipoh. He read law at the University of Malaya in Singapore and was among the inaugural group of 22 to graduate

from the Law Faculty in 1961.

He was admitted to the Singapore Bar on Jan 31, 1962, and began his practice at the firm of Braddell Brothers. In 1969, he joined the firm of Shook Lin & Bok.

On July 1, 1986, he became the first person to be appointed as Judicial Commissioner. His elevation to the position of Supreme Court judge followed soon in 1988.

"Those are the kind of credentials that not many people have," said Mr Rajah. "He has seen many faces of the law and has the ability to give a fair, sympathetic hearing, showing deliberation and consideration."

Mr Chan was among the top legal minds who asked an international court in 2003 to throw out Malaysia's request for an immediate halt to Singapore's reclamation works at Pulau Tekong and Tuas.

The dispute began in 2002 and re-

sulted in the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea asking both sides to have independent experts study the impact of the reclamation.

Both countries announced that they had reached agreement early last year.

Malaysia dropped its legal suit against Singapore, instead of heading for international arbitration as planned. Singapore could continue reclaiming land but would take steps to minimise the environmental impact.

Mr Chan is also responsible for the landmark decision in 2000 to allow local law firms to merge with foreign ones.

"It was a far-sighted reform and it has set the stage for lawyers to learn and benefit from foreign lawyers. It's now up to individuals to make use of the opportunity," said Senior Counsel Deborah Barker.

Added lawyer Tony Yeo from Drew

and Napier: "This sort of reform needs strong leadership for it to come through. He is definitely a strong leader who felt this would be good for the practice."

Many other lawyers agreed Mr Chan's experience would equip him for the tasks of Chief Justice. They were all praise for his sense of sound and fair judgment.

"He is held in high regard by all lawyers who know him," said Senior Counsel Joseph Grimberg.

Added Mr G.P. Selvam, a former judge and now a partner in law firm Haq and Selvam: "But more importantly, as a person, he's an absolute gem. He is very noble, willing to help others around him and is respected for the quality of his judgment."

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