CJ ‘a champion of good judicial sense’

CJ Chan’s commitment to justice earns him respect of many: Lawyers

By THAM YUEN-C

A GOOD judge is one who has a “judicial temperament”, and one “either has it, or he does not have it”, he had once said.

By all accounts, Singapore’s Chief Justice Chan Sek Keong not only had it – he was the champion of good judicial sense.

Lawyers interviewed yesterday about the top judge’s impending retirement lauded his fairness and determination in maintaining a fair judicial process.

Chief Justice Chan will retire on Nov 6, the day he turns 75.

In an interview he gave to the Singapore Academy of Law journal Inter Se in 2006, when he spoke on the qualities of a judicial temperament, Chief Justice Chan said that a good judge was one who could put himself in the shoes of both the opposing parties and their lawyers.

“Then, you will be able to understand a lot more about the case, even if counsel fails to persuade you of the justice of his case,” he had said.

His commitment to justice has earned him the respect of many in the legal fraternity, the lawyers said.

Under his watch, the common man knows that he will not be denied justice in our courts any more than the criminal may think he can escape or hoodwink justice, said Senior Counsel Wong Meng Meng, president of the Law Society of Singapore.

The lawyers also described the Chief Justice as having one of Singapore’s sharpest legal minds.

Senior Counsel Abirn Yeo said: “All counsel who have appeared before him, win or lose, you know your case has been fully considered. Such is his mental ability that he can come up with arguments and counter-arguments you have not thought of.”

The Chief Justice, who was born in Ipoh, had graduated top of his cohort in 1955, and was offered a teaching bursary. But he did not want to be a teacher, and so he studied law.

Before being called to the bench, CJ Chan had been a practising lawyer for more than 20 years.

As Singapore’s top judge, he had led Singapore to victory at the International Court of Justice in the Pedra Branca dispute.


For that, CJ Chan was conferred the Order of Temasek (Second Class), one of the highest accolades awarded by the state.

In 2000, he was the first Asian jurist to be given the International Jurists Award for his outstanding contributions to the administration of justice.

As Singapore’s Attorney-General (A-G) from 1992 to 2006, he was also credited with transforming the relatively small Attorney-General’s Chambers into a mighty team of lawyers that could take on any complex legal issue.

During his 14-year stint as A-G, he was instrumental in reforming and modernising Singapore law, by setting up an International Affairs Division and the Law Reform and Revision Division under the AGC.

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Menon a fitting choice, say top lawyers

SINGAPORE’S fourth Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon had a stellar legal career in private practice before moving to public service.

And he has made decisions that make his appointment a fitting one, said senior members of the legal community.

As a lawyer, he was widely recognised as a leader in areas like commercial disputes and arbitration, and notably recognised as “unquestionably Singapore’s leading arbitrator” in various law journals in 2005 and 2006.

Mr Menon began his legal career at law firm Shoos Lin & Bok in 1987 and became a partner in 1990. He then went on to join Wong Partnership, Rajah & Tann and Jones Day as partner between 1991 and 2006.

He served for a year as judicial commissioner of the Supreme Court between April 2006 and March 2007, and was appointed senior counsel in 2008.

Mr Menon returned to Rajah & Tann and became managing partner in August 2009 before his appointment as Attorney-General on Oct 1, 2010, a position he held until June 24 this year. He was appointed Judge of Appeal on Aug 1.

As public prosecutor, Mr Menon oversaw the implementation of the Criminal Procedure Code 2010, which made sea changes to the criminal case process.

In the area of civil and international law, Mr Menon also oversaw the advisory and drafting work undertaken by the Attorney-General’s Chambers. This included matters linked to the general and presidential elections, public finance, casino operations, new media and land acquisition.

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Senior Counsel Lee Eng Beng, managing partner of law firm Rajah & Tann, was joint managing partner at the Big Four firm with Mr Menon from February to October 2010, when Mr Menon left to become Singapore’s Attorney-General.

He said of Mr Menon: “He has that extremely rare combination of intellect, wisdom and personality.”

Mr Lee also noted Mr Menon’s “strong sense of justice and principles, awe-inspiring legal and oratorical skills, and an enormous work capacity matched only by his drive and focus.”

Drew & Napier chief executive, Senior Counsel Davinder Singh, said that Mr Menon’s “sharp legal mind, integrity and deep sense of right and wrong” would make him an excellent Chief Justice who would “command the universal respect and confidence of the legal community”.

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