"The prosecution of Lingle for contempt of court"

by Former Chief Justice, NUS Law Distinguished Fellow
Mr Chan Sek Keong

Synopsis

"The prosecution of Christopher Lingle, a NUS Senior Fellow in European Studies, and International Herald Tribune for contempt of court in 1994 caused a minor kerfuffle among the Western liberal media. Twenty years later, it continues to reverberate in Singapore's political, legal and academic environment.

To critics, foreign and local, of Singapore's political system, it was a symbol of repression of political dissent by an intolerant regime. To free speech proponents, it was an act of suppression of free speech by an intolerant regime. To the Government, it was a necessary act to prevent confidence in the independence and integrity the courts - of its most important state institutions - from being undermined.

To the Public Prosecutor, it was a legitimate apolitical and impartial act of law enforcement of a constitutionally-sanctioned law. To the legal profession, it was grist to the mill, even if some disagreed with the law or the purpose of the prosecution. To academics, it might have been an act of suppression academic freedom of expression and research in relation to the politics of Singapore. To law students, it was just another case they had to study in constitutional and criminal law.

There is however, one other face, or phase, of this prosecution that the public does not know of. The then Attorney-General who prosecuted Lingle considers it a forensic triumph, given the limitations of the investigative framework. In this talk, he will revisit why he did what he had to do in order to bring the requisite evidence before the court. He will also offer some comments on whether the law of contempt of court is still necessary or obsolete as a coercive measure of self-protection for the courts to be judges in their own cause.

About the Speaker

Mr Chan Sek Keong was born on 5 November 1937 in Ipoh and was a member of the inaugural batch of students admitted to the Faculty of Law of the then University of Malaya, now National University of Singapore in 1957. He graduated in 1961 and was admitted to the Bar in January 1962. He practiced as a lawyer for a number of years in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore before being appointed the first Judicial Commissioner of Singapore in July 1986. Two years later, he became a Judge of the Supreme Court of Singapore.

In 1992, he was appointed the Attorney-General of Singapore, a position he relinquished in 2006 when he was sworn in as the third Chief Justice of Singapore. He retired in 2012, after having spent 26 years in legal service. On 1 October 2013, Mr Chan was appointed as the NUS Faculty of Law’s first Distinguished Fellow.