

The Hon Wong Yan-lung *GBM, SC*
DOCTOR OF LAWS *honoris causa*

Address

Chancellor, Chairman, President, Council members, distinguished guests, faculty members and students:

On behalf of all the honorary graduates, may I express our most sincere gratitude to the University for conferring upon us this exceptional honour and for your very kind words of citations.

I hope you would not find it amiss for me to begin with a children's story. To me, it contains gems of wisdom relevant to my previous experience in the administration of justice.

“Seven blind mice set out to investigate a creature. The first six each inspected only the part he first encountered. They saw respectively a pillar, a snake, a spear, a cliff, a fan and a rope. They disagreed among themselves and a big quarrel ensued. Having had the benefit of the others' findings, the last mouse examined the creature thoroughly, from one side to the other, and from top to bottom. At the end, he announced the creature had all the features described by the other six, but in sum it was an elephant.”

The unprecedented and successful “One Country Two Systems” principle has opened up uncharted territories in the law, with common law applied under Chinese sovereignty, international human rights covenants implemented through the Basic Law, and multiple lines of authorities from different common law jurisdictions converging in our courts.

Intricate and controversial issues abound during my tenure as Secretary for Justice. Many touched on the proper interpretation of the Basic Law, appertaining to constitutional development, relationship between the Executive and the Legislature, ordinary residence in the HKSAR, state immunity and foreign affairs, public order and fundamental freedoms, privacy and school drug test, and many more. Most are intertwined with significant public interests and some inevitably politicised.

On my visit to the House of Lords, Lord Geoffrey Howe gave me a word of advice: “Do not take opposing views negatively. You cannot always be right.” Indeed we are prone to put our ego ahead of the pursuit of truth. Hence the need to approach our tasks with a sense of meekness, which is a balanced attitude based upon a true estimate of what you know and what you don't know.

When you don't or cannot take anything for granted, you work hard to get it right. You embark on in-depth research and analysis, delve into comparative jurisprudence, and leave no stone unturned. But where, notwithstanding the due diligence, the area remains grey, you will have to grope as the blind mice did. Some basic tools will

come in handy, including an honesty to call a spade a spade, a sharp common sense, some innate principles of fairness, and an open mind ready for something new and unknown. They will operate like the paws of the mice, gaining dexterity with time and practice.

Never dread and downplay the different and opposing views expressed. For what have been advocated, though unpleasant or incomplete, may well be an integral feature of the entire truth.

Communication is key but must be genuine and with respect. In some variations of our blind mice story, the mice had the good sense to stop arguing and start listening to one another, so that the existence of the elephant was revealed through collaboration.

One should develop a resistance against any vain desire to win the case, against any actual or perceived pressure from any authority or the crowd, and against any temptation to take the easy or convenient way out. And more subtly, one needs to make conscious efforts to lay aside one's own preconceived views and prejudices. That's integrity, where applicable to judges is the well-known doctrine of judicial independence, which is of cardinal importance to the rule of law.

At the end of the day, it is substance plus sincerity that will prevail. How the last mouse won his brothers over is illuminating. He was not deterred by the other six holding wholly different views. After completing his own due diligence, though firmly believing he is right, he chose not to argue, but engaged his brothers by taking them on a guided tour of the entire body of the elephant, presenting them with hard evidence along the way.

For all the graduating students today, I hope the blind mice story can also offer some food for thought. Do not be satisfied with the first impression, the superficial or the hearsay. Discover the truth by doing your own search; test the propositions; go out and see the world for yourself, walk the thousand miles.

Your examination, however, should not be merely horizontal. It should also be from top to bottom. Set out to understand the community of which you form part, high and low. My involvement with the homeless and socially displaced in Hong Kong in the early 1990's helped prepare me to take up the challenge to serve as the law minister. The single most powerful motivation to "do something" is the exposure to others' needs. It pulls at your heart's string and compels you to move out of your own comfort zone.

Pope Paul VI said this, "Somebody should tell us, right at the start of our lives, that we are dying. Then we might live life to the limit, every minute of every day. Do it! I say. Whatever we want to do, do it now! There are only so many tomorrows."

This is of course not a call to indulge, to eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow you die. This is an exhortation that we live every minute of our life to the full, enthusiastically and with a sense of purpose. Any wastage is criminal.

Thank you and we wish you all the best in your future pursuits.