

Keynote Speech- “Integrity and Justice”

The Hon. Mr Justice Patrick CHAN, GBM
Non-Permanent Judge of the Court of Final Appeal, HKSAR

The theme of this Forum is Integrity. This morning, I would like to share with you my experience on this important social value. As a judge, I would start with the Rule of law.

The Rule of law is aimed at achieving equality, fairness and justice for all. It is a cornerstone of a civilized society. And integrity is an indispensable foundation of this cornerstone.

The Rule of law is not merely a slogan for activists and politicians. It is an objective which must be faithfully pursued; a policy which must be actively practised, and a standard which must be constantly maintained at the highest level.

In a place where the Rule of law is practised, its citizens loyally obey the law, both the letter and spirit of the law; government officials serve the people within the boundaries of the law and do not abuse their powers or misuse their discretions; and judges uphold the law and administer justice fairly and impartially. It is a society in which equality, fairness and justice prevail.

Where there is the Rule of law, it is a safe, stable and peaceful place to live in; tourists would like to come and visit; students (like you) would come to study and gain more life experience, people would like to come and do

business and foreign investments would flow in. This is in the interest of the development and prosperity of that place.

But the Rule of law cannot be maintained without the integrity of the citizens, government officials and judges. Lack of integrity is very often the reason behind corruption, malpractices and the breaking of the law; it brings unfairness and injustice in the community; and it breeds contempt for the Rule of law. If the lack of integrity becomes common or even widespread, the vital cornerstone in society is in real danger of collapsing.

Integrity is very often used as a compliment to describe a person, sometimes a professional person, who has high moral principles, whose actions are consistent with his beliefs and principles, who would not compromise his principles for personal gains, who would act fairly and with honesty, and who would not do anything contrary to his conscience even if it means that this would be detrimental to his own interest. Integrity in this admirable and noble sense is of course a goal for all of us.

But it is not only persons in high positions or celebrities or professional people who should have integrity. Integrity is a common enough concept. It is a value shared by all ordinary people. According to the Oxford Dictionary, integrity is simply the ability of being honest and truthful with regard to a person's actions. The most commonly used Chinese term for integrity consists of two characters [誠信] which mean "honesty and trustworthiness". In other words, a person with integrity is no more and no less than an honest person who is truthful and trustworthy. Honesty, truthfulness and trustworthiness are common values which all of us, in all walks of life, are

expected to hold. It is not too much to expect a person to be honest, truthful and trustworthy. This is not something which is difficult to achieve. It is something which every person, you and me, in a civilized society can and should always do.

But I would go even further. In my opinion, integrity is the minimum standard which is required of every person: to be honest and truthful to others. There is no valid or sensible reason to act otherwise. In everyday life, it is also the way in which we wish others to behave towards us when we deal with them. Do unto others what you wish others to do unto you.

In a civilized society, everyone, be he a vendor in the street, a shopkeeper in a department store, a merchandise trader, a taxi driver, or a university student, must show at least some integrity, that is, they must be honest and truthful in what they do and they must show that they can be trusted. Nothing less can be accepted or tolerated.

A shopkeeper must be honest. If a tourist wants to buy a certain brand of camera and pays the price for that camera. How would he feel when he finds out later that it is only a second hand camera? Would he come and buy from that shop again?

A seller of merchandise is expected to be trustworthy. If a foreign buyer orders goods from the seller and opens a letter of credit in his favour for the goods, only to receive at a much later stage a container of rubbish, would he do business with the seller again?

If you want to go home from the airport, how would you feel if the taxi driver tampers with the meter or overcharges you or drives you round and round in circles?

The difference between an honest and a dishonest trader is that an honest trader hopes to do more business with his customer in future while a dishonest trader hopes that he would never see that customer again. Needless to say, business could hardly flourish or even go on with dishonest, untruthful and untrustworthy shopkeepers, traders or taxi drivers frequently taking advantage of their customers.

The same applies to government officials. One would like to see in a civilized society government officials who are honest and trustworthy and would not expect them to be corrupt or showing special favours to anyone. This would be an abuse of power and a breach of the trust which the public has placed in them. They are required to act fairly, avoid any situation of potential conflict of interests and refuse to accept any bribes. You would not tolerate, for instance, a police officer accepting an advantage in return for tipping off the gangsters of an anti-crime operation or a senior official giving preference to his relatives when deciding to award a government contract, even in the absence of any evidence of personal gains.

Worse still, one would be horrified to see a judge dispensing justice according to his personal whims and preferences or even as a result of having received any benefits. This would be a travesty of justice. The sense of grievance and sense of helplessness felt by victims of such injustice are very often quite immense.

A system in which government officials and judges uphold the highest standard of integrity is a system which commands respect and confidence. But a system in which government officials or even judges are dishonest or not trustworthy, or are susceptible to abusing their powers and position, is a corrupt system. It is a system without the Rule of law, a system without justice.

Hong Kong is, if I may proudly say so, known to be a city with a fairly high standard of integrity, thanks to the efforts made in the past few decades. It is a society in which we treasure honesty, truthfulness and trustworthiness as important values which we would vigorously defend at all costs. Although there are occasional exceptions, they are not frequent. But even a few would be too many. One needs just a few cases where integrity is conveniently compromised to cast doubt on the integrity of the whole community, on the confidence in the whole system and on the ability of the system to do justice. Just one or two such cases and it would take a long time to mend the indented image. The same applies to every society and every country.

If integrity and justice are so dear to our hearts, we must always be vigilant. A good reputation is hard to earn but can easily be tarnished or even destroyed. Integrity must be constantly kept under watch. It is a culture which must be developed, promoted and cherished. All of us have a very important role to play. And we can all make valuable contributions to this cause.