

# Not The Inaugural Law-Medical Debate – The Account of Mission Impossible from an Insider

By Dr Toh Han Chong, Deputy Editor

## HISTORY

When Dr Lee Chung Horn (Gleneagles Medical Centre), Dr Umapathi (National Neuroscience Centre), Dr Sreedharan (Alexandra Hospital) and I were invited to represent the Medical Alumni in the first ever Law-Medical Debate, we did not know what we were getting into. Professor Arthur Lim explained to us in his fabulous Tate-Gallery-style Gleneagles eye clinic that both the Medical Alumni and the Singapore Academy of Law had agreed to stage this august event to foster better ties between two overworked and commonly misunderstood professions. The venue was Parliament House auditorium, and the motion would be “*Lawyers make better politicians than doctors*”. This sounded serious. “*Politics is serious business,*” as a former opposition politician and lawyer, Harban Singh, once said.

## DOCTOR-POLITICIANS

Chung Horn, our team captain, who was also a top debater of the Rafflesian school, rallied us to attempt to put a decent case together. We had a great time bonding as a team, and discovered new facts about doctor-politicians. Left-of-centre local doctor-politicians included Dr Lee Siew Choh, Dr Poh Soo Kai, Dr Chee Phui Hung the Agong and Dr Tan Cheng Bock. Globally, there were Dr Salvador Allende, Dr Che Guevara and Dr Jose Rizal. These doctor-politicians were humanists, understood the ground, felt deeply for the underclass and made big sacrifices. Political revolutionaries Che Guevara, Jose Rizal, and Salvador Allende lost their lives for their cause to larger and darker forces. Their politics may not have worked for society but their courage left a lasting legacy. Dr Tan Cheng Bock believed that change must come from within and eventually became a PAP MP to great effect, maintaining to this day that one does not have to be a “yes” man to be in the PAP, but one might end up with gastric ulcers standing up for one’s beliefs! Then of course we have the new medical faces of the PAP. We deftly decided not to bring them up in the debate so that the lawyers would not get the opportunity to use them for unnecessary target practice. The last few Sisyphean months of the SARS battle has been a stark experience for the doctor-politicians, doctors and all healthcare workers. And then there is Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Prime Minister of Malaysia. A son of Singapore’s medical school, he survived ragging by his senior Dr Chee Phui Hung the Agong, he survived UMNO politics, and is the champion of modern Malaysia and “Brudder to Moderate Muslims” everywhere. We would wrap up the debate with Dr Sun Yat Sen, the Father of Modern China, revered by Kuomintang, communists and Chinese the world over.

But the debate night within the corridors of power would change all that.

## HIGH NOON IN PARLIAMENT HOUSE

And so on 11 July 2003, we arrived in Parliament House, ready to surgically cut up the Proposition meat. When one thinks of the word *debate*, one would think of the great parliamentary speakers in British politics, the unforgettable debates between Al Gore and George W Bush in the historic Presidential elections of 2000, and the national televised schools and colleges debates that were our reality TV in the old days, now replaced by *The Bachelorette* and *The Amazing Race*. Prophet Umapathi warned us at one of our final sombre debate meetings on the evening the Iranian twins died, that the Law Team may pull a fast one and make the debate one big joke. No way, we thought, not in Parliament House, not in front of Attorney General Chan Sek Keong, the guest-of-honour.

Being an Anglo-Chinese School (ACS) old boy, I knew that the Law Team was captained by the President of the ACS OBA, Senior Counsel Chelva Rajah, and his team comprised three ACS old boys and one Malaysian girl married to an ACS old boy. There was Deputy Public Prosecutor Chris Ong, the Wayne Rooney of their team, Drew and Napier litigator Adrian “Teenage Textbook” Tan, and Family Law Queen Professor Leong Wai Kum. This Law Team was capable of samba debating to our English parliamentary style long balls, teamwork and short passes. As the night wore on, our balls would drop.

The Inaugural Law-Medical Debate was finally underway, chaired by famous local writer Dr Catherine Lim. The judges were Ms Fang Ai Lian, Senior Counsel and MP Indranee Rajah, and Dr Anne Tan-Kendrick. The male law debaters turned up in PAP white, with Professor Leong in a tight, bright miniskirt. They placed a boiled and stuffed rabbit in front of us, in reference to a recent *New Paper* article about the event. Our worst fears came true, this was no serious debate, this was *Friday Night Live* in the *Boom Boom Room* with no OB markers and plenty of BO! Friday the 11 was turning into Friday the 13 for us – one big nightmare!

## THE MOTION BECOMES WATERY

The Proposition’s first speaker announced their *jee hsiao* stand – that lawyers were scum, politicians were scum, so lawyers made better politicians than doctors. He explained that Professor Leong was not in PAP all-white, in case we doctors mistook her for a nurse and chased her around the House. And the males were in all-white because the team that wore all-white in Parliament House normally won the



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Dr Toh Han Chong, BSc (Lond), MBBChir (Camb), MRCP (UK), FAMS, is a Consultant Medical Oncologist at the National Cancer Centre. He hasn’t debated seriously in 20 years, so that may partly explain the mauling the Medical Team got in the verbal WWF against the lawyers. The Medical Team believe that, being doctors, they will not make the same mistake twice. They have hired foreign talent Mike “Mojo” Myers (yeah baby!) to coach them for a rematch.

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debate! They spun a fast, light and colourful candyfloss of wit that our verbal scalpels could not cut into, and our mouths were stuck in their sticky goo.

By the time Chung Horn delivered a superb oration that would have soared in a normal debating epic, but appeared a little out of place with this hysterical crowd, the medical titanic was sinking after hitting the legal iceberg of high comedy.

Adrian Tan, with his best Jim Carrey facial expressions, addressed Chung Horn as "Mr Horny", took jibes at politicians and local politics and ended by saying that lawyers were very good at covering their asses, like scum politicians, whereas all doctors did were to uncover lawyers' asses. Adrian pronounced that doctors could not be good politicians, because after the tragic demise of the Iranian twins, all the doctors could too honestly admit was, "We failed".

We were proud of our second speaker, Sree, a busy houseman in Alexandra Hospital, who stuck to the Opposition game plan and fired some samba-style verbal shots to crowd approval. His funniest moment was not meant to be funny, though. In bringing up the SARS-fighting Queen Bee, WHO Director-General and Norway's former Prime Minister, Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, the lawyers and floor roared, "Gro who?" Of course he brought up Dr "I-did-it-my-way" Mahathir, who confessed that the practice of medicine made him a better politician in his 13<sup>th</sup> 1996 Sir Gordon Arthur Ransome Oration.

Then Professor Leong took the stage. Renowned for her seriousness and serious body of knowledge on family law, she was now wowing the floor with her body in a tight miniskirt. She said her first two speakers had proven the case, so it was time for something completely different. Her stand was that women were better at everything, made the best politicians, and there were more women lawyers than women doctors, so therefore, lawyers made the best politicians. Women were prettier, dressed better, did not suffer from erectile dysfunction, and did not need Viagra because they did not suffer from a loss of libido as they got older. When she said women enjoyed making babies, the Agong shouted excitedly from the front row, "So do!!"

Our third speaker, Umapathi rolled up his sleeves, announced that doctors could also get into the act, and delivered a comic and captivating speech that deservedly won him the Best Speaker Award for the night. Umapathi's classic Humpty Dumpty analogy contrasted the medical and legal responses to the Egg's Great Fall. The lawyer-politician's first response was – who was liable? The doctor-politician's first response was to do mouth-to-shell resuscitation, and then ask what went wrong. Why would a happy egg get up on the wall? Was he suicidal, and was he just another victim of the Singapore education system? He concluded by calling the lawyers *how lien*, to which the lawyers accepted with great spirit.



(Clockwise, from top left) Who let the Docs out ... woof! Dr Sreedharan, Dr Lee Chung Horn, Dr Toh Han Chong & Dr Umapathi.



A rapt audience, hanging on to every word...



And the floor goes bonkers!!!



A "rose" among the "thorns" (in our tickled sides).

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The floor session was more disparate. The Agong, our elder statesman of the medical alumni and veteran of many political fisticuffs, expressed confusion, and said he thought he was coming for a serious debate. He said that Law was, by nature, adversarial and bred the politics of adversity, whereas Medicine was about healing, and so would invite a more embracing politics of conflict resolution. Lawyer Deborah Barker said that doctors were always on top of things and could be too almighty, but were they any good from below as on top? Umapathi's wife delivered a classic floor rebuttal for the Medical Team, revealing that her husband was good both on top and below! But I sensed a few from the medical floor were jaded from the SARS trenches, and disappointed that they did not get to watch *Rumpole of the Bailey*, and got instead, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*.

By the time I rose to close the Opposition case, I felt verbally impotent. I pointed out that lawyer-politicians with their real or imagined weapons of mass destruction and mass reproduction (think Saddam Hussein and ex-President Bill Clinton) would not understand the sanctity of Life as a doctor-politician would, and we ejaculated a toy missile to drive home the point. I desperately rebutted the Proposition's depiction of us as noble SARS-fighting angels by alluding to hospital backstabbing and medical politics. Nobody bought it. It was like a virgin trying to convince a rowdy crowd that she was a slut.

Finally, the climax of the night: the Proposition's final speaker. The rock-and-roll King of Advocacy, SC Chelva Rajah, did not swing the motion, but instead boogied the legal locomotion. Confabulating after some *Tiger* beer, he shamelessly bribed the female judges with roses, cajoled and seduced the floor with his thrusting and throbbing...er...charisma, and played his six minutes of verbal electric guitar to loud cheers and metaphorical hot panties on stage. The atmosphere was charged. He called for our second speaker to come out, as it was now alright to "come out". Sree, like most of us, had decided not to come out to the mike at the front of the stage, confessing that he was not wearing socks. Umapathi placed a timely pink feathered boa he had brought around Sree to loud cheers in the now *gila* arena. Politics, Chelva concluded, was more about persuasion, bribery, seduction and corruption in many parts of the world, and who more unethical to do it but scum lawyers. It was a masterful performance by Chelva.

#### FEELING LIKE HUMPTY DUMPTY

When chief judge Ms Fang Ai Lian summed up eloquently, she confessed that the eminent lady judges were floored and charmed by the "scummy" lawyers. She admitted that the doctors had more content. But the scum were so scummy they managed to convince the judges that they carried the motion, which we had pronounced was watery and had to be flushed down the toilet. I should have

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# Winning the Occasion

By *The Hobbit*

*"Lawyers make better politicians than doctors."*

Two august institutions. Two powerful guilds. Two towers of such talent concentration that if ever necessary, each one on its own can fill all the seats in Parliament House, and we don't just mean the auditorium.

And such a sensitive motion. Each party has its own obvious standard-bearing examples of successful and unsuccessful politicians. Not just international or historical examples, but recent, nearby and maybe uncomfortable ones.

And really, if there was going to be a real debate, and a victor and a vanquished, then, some very serious verbal dogfights would have to be the order of the day. In other words, a real debate would have possibly touched some raw nerves, uncovered some old wounds and entailed copious bilious oratory.

One party concentrated on winning the debate, another on winning the occasion. The judges probably realised that the occasion was more important or convenient than the debate and they gave the night to the lawyers.

Our medical team may feel somewhat shortchanged by the turn of events, as they had prepared quite extensively for the debate. But, really, how else could it have turned out? We could either preserve the dignity of the debate and maybe risk not keeping the peace, or we could preserve the dignities of two grand professions and amputate the dignity of the debate. The occasion requested the latter, though debating purists would require the former.

Perhaps one speaker from the floor (Dr Chong Yeh Woei, Honorary Assistant Treasurer of SMA) said it best, "Doctors seek the truth." (i.e. Lawyers don't.)

Sometimes, pragmatism is more important than truth and if pragmatism was suited better with the debating equivalent of a foam party, so be it. Sometimes the stakes are so high, the truth may not be worth it.

Having a winner of the occasion was a lot safer than having a winner of the debate. And I would agree that the Law team read the occasion better: they knew it was better to be correct than right. Because the truth sometimes will not set you free. Most good politicians already know this, anyway. ■

remembered from schooldays that the geeks never get the chicks (our lady judges). It's the flamboyant, wickedly funny, dangerous guys that always do.

### **HEALERS ALWAYS**

When SGH Head of Urology, Dr Christopher Cheng, a sailing and impotence expert, later told me we should have changed tack and followed the wind (did he mean flatulence?) of irreverence and irrelevance like the Law Team, I admitted that we did not have the mental Viagra to raise up the sail of slapstick.

The next day, Adrian Tan sent me an appreciative e-mail to say that everyone had a ball, and said he would be happy for a rematch one day. If there was to be a rematch,

I suggested to him that the Law and Medical Teams receive the motion an hour before, and then the doctors in the House would be ready to do emergency verbal surgery. As for the Inaugural Singapore Law-Medical Debate, the Persuaders got the upper hand on the Healers.

But make no mistake, the Law Team are three honourable men and one honourable sexy mama. On 11 July 2003, *Friday Night Live* in Parliament House, laughter was the best medicine, and the lawyers got the prescription right. ■

### **Note:**

*The tone of this article is in keeping with an extremely politically incorrect and risqué night.*

### **Acknowledgement:**

*We wish to thank Professor Arthur Lim for providing us with the debate photos.*