

**SPEECH BY
YAB DATO' SERI ABDULLAH BIN HAJI AHMAD BADAWI
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Presiden, Majlis Peguam Malaysia, Yang Amat Arif dan Yang Arif, Hakim-hakim, Diformat, Tuan-tuan, Puan-puan, Para Hadirin yang saya hormati sekalian

Saya ingin mengucapkan terima kasih kepada Majlis Peguam Malaysia di atas jemputan untuk menghadiri jamuan makan malam tahunan ini. Saya juga ingin mengucapkan terima kasih kerana diberi peluang untuk berucap sepatah dua kata di majlis yang begitu bermakna ini.

Saya difahamkan Mesyuarat Agung Tahunan Majlis Peguam Malaysia telah diadakan pada pagi tadi, dan ianya sudah menjadi satu tradisi untuk mesyuarat tersebut disusuli dengan jamuan makan malam ini. Saya juga dimaklumkan bahawa para ahli majlis telah memilih seorang Presiden baru yang akan bertugas selama setahun akan datang. Justeru, saya ingin mengucapkan tahniah kepada Presiden dan jawatankuasannya kerana berjaya dipilih, dan seterusnya berdoa agar Majlis Peguam Malaysia akan terus maju di bawah kepimpinan baru tersebut.

Ladies and gentlemen

I am told that it is customary to tell a joke at functions such as this. Unfortunately, this seems a rather difficult time for levity, including the telling of lawyer jokes, given the very sombre developments currently unfolding in Iraq. I am, however, pleased to note that the Bar Council organised a forum on Iraq yesterday, which I was told was quite informative and insightful.

I must say that I did wonder about what to speak to you tonight. I realise that I am in the company of men and women who are learned, intelligent and articulate. Your profession demands exacting standards from you. You must always act without fear or favour. You must uphold the rule of law and be bound by honesty and integrity. Many of you are known to members of the public. You are judged by your conduct - you are defined by what you do, how you act and what you achieve. To strive for excellence was made incumbent upon you when you were gowned on the day you were admitted to the bar as an advocate and solicitor of the High Court of Malaya. You owe a duty to your profession to attain the highest standards possible. You belong to a profession steeped in tradition, yet you must develop new skills and accept new ideas to be able to compete effectively in an increasingly changing and uncertain environment.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me share with you some of my aspirations for the legal profession. I believe that excellence must be what you strive for, all of the time. Your ambition must be to provide world-class legal services. Malaysian lawyers must be able to compete anywhere, and against anyone. What is required is a change in mindset. Thinking in the conventional manner is not wrong, but just as legal jurisprudence has never remained stagnant, so too must the thinking of today's lawyers evolve with time.

The boundaries between your profession and others have become blurred. You are now expected to acquire a broader range of skills and your tools must be crafted in new ways. Lawyers today must be able to think both regionally and commercially. Law firms must be able to act as a reliable support for Malaysian businesses venturing abroad. At the same time, Malaysian law firms must be able to target potential businesses intending to invest in Malaysia. You must do away with the old ideas and habits of waiting for things to fall into your lap. Law firms must now be creative and bold in the way they target potential clients.

This is what your competition is doing. Foreign law firms have captured territories by changing their mindset - they don't wait for things to happen, they make it happen. A time may come in the future where you may face competition from foreign law firms. This may be a consequence of our agreement under G.A.T.S.. But you should have nothing to fear if you are committed to excellence and to providing world-class services. Even without G.A.T.S., you must think in global terms, for this is a rapidly globalising world, a world in which borders and rules restricting access and mobility are quickly circumvented by technological advancements.

I must also call upon Malaysian businesses to support our local law firms. Why instruct foreign law firms when you should be giving our own law firms a chance?. This trend is especially evident when Malaysian businesses head abroad for cross-border deals or issue securities internationally. I hope they realise that British and American law firms have a global presence today because they were supported by their own local businesses. We must do the same. Local support will enable our Malaysian law firms to build up their confidence and capabilities to compete with the best in the world.

Ladies and gentlemen

In order for Malaysia's economy to thrive, we must be able to build domestic resilience, expand our markets and attract foreign investment. We have spent billions of ringgit to upgrade our infrastructure, to the extent that many of our facilities compare favourably to the developed world. However, Malaysia's competitive edge would be significantly blunted if the services sector lagged in terms of quality. As lawyers, you play a significant role in creating an environment conducive to domestic and foreign investment. The business community must trust you and be confident of your ability to provide quality advice and solutions equal to, or indeed surpassing, that of your foreign counterparts.

This change in mindset must begin early. We must encourage and motivate students undertaking the study of law to broaden their perspectives. There are several measures that can be taken to achieve this focus on excellence and quality. Tertiary level students must be able to choose from a wide selection of subjects that encourage specialisation in areas where there is a need for experts. If necessary, our local institutions should engage foreign teachers who may be more experienced in these subjects until such a time as when our teachers are able to assume the same responsibility. I also believe that being exposed to the right environment makes a significant difference. Perhaps our local institutions that offer law courses can enter into an arrangement to have an exchange program with foreign institutions. Our students can benefit from their experiences overseas. Similarly, lawyers can be sent on attachments to foreign law firms with whom your firm may have an existing relationship. In addition, training in understanding commercial matters and client management is most desirable for lawyers today. Some of you may be well versed in

these matters, but others may not. You must be able to understand your clients' business and manage their legal problems effectively to be adding value to them.

The new Bar Council might be putting together ideas as part of their program for the year. I am happy to be able to assist you in identifying your first task. May I suggest that you carefully consider organising training for lawyers along the lines I have just suggested.

I would also like to say that lawyers must always act in a manner that is professional. Although you may get close to your clients, you should remain independent and ensure that your advise does not compromise your integrity. I say this in relation to certain accounting firms involved in the recent spate of corporate scandals worldwide. The results have been devastating. Share prices plunged and there was a drastic loss of investor confidence. Hence, lawyers must be careful not to engage in any activity that could cause such results. The legal fraternity cannot afford such a loss of credibility.

Ladies and gentlemen

I believe that the Malaysian legal profession is now approaching a crossroads of sorts. On the one hand, we have globalisation, competition, technology, mobility of capital and people, and other challenges confronting us. On the other hand, we must now live in uncertain and precarious times. We must not allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by the trials and tribulations. I urge you to rise to the occasion and embrace excellence.

Thank you.