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Oration by Professor JC Smith, CBE, QC,
MA, LL.D, LL.D, FBA for the Conferment of
the Degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*
on His Majesty Sultan Azlan Shah
at the Congregation of the
University of Nottingham, UK
for the Conferment of Degrees,
Nottingham, 11 July 1986.

A Tribute by Professor JC Smith

Former Tutor of HRH at Nottingham University, UK

Chancellor, thirty-three years ago a young Malayan student stood before your predecessor to receive the degree of Bachelor of Laws. Today, he returns after a career in which he reached the very pinnacle of the legal profession in Malaysia. He returns as Sultan of Perak, as Deputy to the King of Malaysia and as himself, the Chancellor of a great University, the University of Malaya.

Azlan Shah was a cheerful and popular undergraduate in our Department of Law who took his legal studies seriously—but not too seriously. He was renowned for his athletic prowess, especially hockey, at which he represented not only the University but also the Northern Counties. After graduating he was called to the English Bar by Lincoln's Inn. On his return to Malaya he rapidly made his mark in the legal profession in a variety of offices—as a magistrate, a prosecutor and a legal adviser to governments. So successful was he that he was appointed to the High Court Bench at the early age of 37. Indeed it is believed that no one,



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before or since, anywhere in the Commonwealth, has been made a High Court judge at—for that office—so tender an age. On the Bench the youthful judge's reputation grew. In 1979 he became Chief Justice of the High Court and in 1982 he attained the highest judicial office, Lord President of the Federal Court of Malaysia. He had the important judicial quality of being a good listener with almost infinite patience who rarely interrupted evidence or argument and then only when it was necessary to do so. But he listened with a percipient and critical mind, as became clear when—sometimes to the discomfiture of those appearing before him—he pronounced judgment on the facts of the law. The breadth and depth of his learning in the law as it appeared in the law reports astonished—and greatly gratified—those who taught him in his student days. We like to think that, at least, we sowed the seeds which, in time, produced so rich a harvest.

In 20 years on the Bench he tried cases and heard appeals involving a great range of law and many of his learned judgments are reported in the law reports. It is a remarkable tribute to his judicial work that those judgments have been collected and published as a separate volume: *Judgments of His Royal Highness Sultan Azlan Shah With Commentary*, edited by Professor Dato Dr Visu Sinnadurai, Professional Law Books Publishers, 1986. They constitute a great contribution to the development of the law in Malaysia at a crucial time in its history.



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A study of these judgments reveals how much of the common law is indeed common to both England and Malaysia. We invoke the same principles and frequently rely on the same authorities. It is remarkable that we find a Malaysian judge, towards the end of the twentieth century, quoting the words of the great Lord Chief Justice of England, Sir Edward Coke, to King James the First; and Coke himself was quoting Bracton who wrote in the 13th century. “The King”, he said, “is under no man, but is under God and the Law.”

In Azlan Shah, Malaysia has a stout defender of the rule of law, of the independence of the judiciary, of the presumption of innocence and of those principles of natural justice and of equity which we value so highly. He has earned respect and admiration for his absolute impartiality. The rich and powerful who came before Mr Justice Azlan Shah soon learnt that, in his court, their wealth and power counted for nothing. The corrupt were told in forthright terms of the abhorrence in which he held their conduct.

Throughout his career he has maintained a close interest in University education and particularly legal education. Even as Chief Justice and Lord President, he continued to act as an external examiner for the degree of Bachelor of Laws in the University of Malaya. Today’s law graduands may reflect that this would be rather like having Lord Denning as one of their examiners.




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His work has been recognised in many ways: by the establishment of an annual series of lectures, the Sultan Azlan Shah Law Lectures, to be given in the Faculty of Law of the University of Malaya; by the conferment on him of honorary degrees, of Doctor of Literature by the University of Malaya and of Doctor of Laws by the Science University of Malaya. Most recently he has been elected Chancellor of the University of Malaya.

His succession to the throne of Perak necessarily brought his judicial career to an end and that was a great loss to the law in Malaysia. But there is counterbalancing gain for he brings to his present role as a constitutional Ruler unrivalled knowledge and experience of the functioning of the Malaysian Constitution and of the powers and duties of Parliament, the executive, the courts and the Ruler himself.

He no longer plays hockey but is still very active on various national and international bodies concerned with the administration and encouragement of that game; and it is said that he is now as proficient with a golf club as he formerly was with a hockey stick. At a recent gathering of Malaysian students in London, the respect and affection in which he is held by the young people of his country was manifest.


Chancellor, I present to you His Royal Highness, Sultan Azlan Shah, as eminently worthy to receive the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*. 





“Your Royal Highness,
to be invited to
give this lecture
which bears your name
is to be granted
a great honour
by a judge
and jurist of
international
repute.”

Lord Saville of Newdigate
Lord of Appeal in Ordinary, House of Lords UK
Information Technology: A Tool for Justice
18th Sultan Azlan Shah Law Lecture, 2004



“The Sultan
Azlan Shah
Law Lecture is
one of the most
prestigious lecture
series of the
common law
world.”

Baroness Helena Kennedy QC
Life Baroness, United Kingdom Parliament
Legal Challenges in Our Brave New World
21st Sultan Azlan Shah Law Lecture, 2007