

**PRESS RELEASE
PARLIAMENT OF SINGAPORE**

**SELECT COMMITTEE ON
DELIBERATE ONLINE FALSEHOODS –
CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES AND COUNTERMEASURES**

The Chairman of the Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods – Causes, Consequences and Countermeasures, Mr Charles Chong, has issued the attached statement in response to an open letter addressed to him.

Office of the Clerk of Parliament
17 April 2018

Open Debate

There is an open letter addressed to the Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods, which I chair. The authors of the letter are unknown. The letter takes issue with our questioning of Dr Thum Ping Tjin.

In his written representation to our Committee, Dr Thum alleged that the Singapore Government is the chief source of fake news in Singapore. He specifically referred to Operation Coldstore, and charged that the founding Prime Minister of Singapore, the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew, was the primary liar.

Dr Thum is entitled to his views. But when he puts them before a Select Committee, he must expect to be questioned about them. And indeed Dr Thum wrote that he was willing to appear before us. It is therefore surprising that the letter suggests Dr Thum was questioned “without warning”.

The letter argues that Dr Thum’s claims should only have been questioned by other historians, and not by a parliamentary committee. This is surprising. Legislators all over the world regularly have robust exchanges with witnesses, including academics. Mr Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO of Facebook, has just finished two days of questioning by US congressional committees. I do not understand why a special immunity is being claimed for academic historians.

Nor is it accurate to describe Dr Thum as an academic historian. We have had some difficulty identifying his precise academic position. In his written representation, he described himself as a “Research Fellow in History”, but in his oral testimony he said he was holding a “visiting professorship in anthropology” at Oxford University. Oxford has confirmed that he is not in fact an employee, and that he is a Visiting Fellow with the Fertility and Reproduction Studies Group in the School of Anthropology. And before that he was a Visiting Scholar (not a Research Fellow) at the Oxford Centre for Global History, another unpaid position.

Dr Thum’s submission also refers to his position as the founder of a group which is involved in political activism. His five-page written submission is not an academic dissertation but a political piece. There is nothing wrong with political activism in itself. But it is odd to make political points – as Dr Thum did – and then hide behind the shield of academia when questioned.

The letter makes the point that Dr Thum's articles have been peer reviewed. But it is not at all clear whether all the assertions Dr Thum made in his written statement had been peer reviewed, and how they had acquired the status of unquestionable truths.

In any event the authors may wish to look more carefully at the actual answers Dr Thum gave. He was asked to explain his position, by reference to relevant documents. When faced with these documents, Dr Thum made a number of concessions: That his writings were misleading in parts; that the British authorities, contrary to his claims, had honestly believed that Operation Coldstore was necessary for security reasons; that he had not read – and sometimes not even heard of – the writings of some of the former leaders of the Communist Party of Malaya; and that some members of the Barisan Sosialis did in fact consider “armed struggle” a legitimate option to pursue at some stage; and that he had disregarded the views of Chin Peng, the Secretary-General of the Communist Party of Malaya, on many important aspects without making it clear that he was disregarding them. These concessions substantially undermined his thesis that Operation Coldstore was launched purely for party political advantage.

As the letter points out, none of us on the Committee are trained historians. We only read Dr Thum's written representation when it came in in February. We asked him to defend a claim that he had put to us. If Dr Thum could not defend his claims under questioning, surely this must reflect on the quality of his writings and research, not the process?

Further, the letter's concerns about academic freedom are misplaced. More than 20 academics, from Singapore and elsewhere, gave oral evidence to our committee. Several were questioned at length. Some disagreed with members of the Committee. All were forthright in their views and I would be very surprised if any of them were intimidated by the process. To be sure, individual members of our Committee did not always agree with the academics who gave evidence to us. But we all benefited from the learning they brought to bear on the questions before us.

Our hearings were held in public. Videos of the proceedings are available online, as are the written representations made to us. Full verbatim transcripts will be produced.

Unless they lied or prevaricated, every witness before us, and the evidence they gave, is protected by parliamentary privilege.

So let us be clear. It was Dr Thum who chose to use our committee, on deliberate **online** falsehoods – to make a political point about Operation Coldstore, a security operation that took place 55 years ago, long before the Internet existed. Having done so, he cannot then plead that his claims should not be questioned, or that he should not be judged on his answers.