

**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.

Office of the Clerk of Parliament
30 April 2018

Project Southeast Asia

Background

1. On 16 April 2018, the trustees of Project Southeast Asia made an online Statement in support of Dr Thum Ping Tjin.¹ I responded to them on 20 April 2018. A copy of my response is enclosed (*Annex A*).

2. The trustees claimed that the Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods, which I chair, ignored Dr Thum's submission when we questioned him about Operation Coldstore. This is untrue. Operation Coldstore was very much part of Dr Thum's submission, which was why he was questioned about it. I also took exception to their claim that historical research could not be challenged by parliamentarians. I told them that they were being presumptuous in telling the Parliament of Singapore how to do its job.

3. The points made by Project Southeast Asia were similar to those in a separate and anonymously drafted Open Letter,² which I had responded to earlier. The similarity suggests the same hands were involved in both documents. Project Southeast Asia urged the public to sign the Open Letter.

Dr Kreager's email

4. After Parliament Secretariat sent my response to the trustees, there was an exchange between two of the trustees, with the other trustees copied. The emails were copied to Parliament Secretariat, it would appear inadvertently.

5. One Professor Jeff Burley, a trustee of Project Southeast Asia, wrote to Dr Philip Kreager on 21 April 2018, asking:

Has PJ seen all the correspondence? If so, what is his response to this official message from Singapore? There comes a point in any discussion like this where you can just draw a line and say we tried. Pursuing things to the bitter end is more likely to be bitter for us than for a government and the University is unlikely to want a pitched battle.

6. Dr Philip Kreager replied, on 22 April 2018, thus:

I have kept continuous contact with PJ on all of this, he has amongst other things suggested a draft reply for me, which I will turn to on return...and which point I shall write to all the trustees on recent developments, which are several and positive. There is a lot of traction, but I need to think about next steps, which I can't just now, as the meeting is a small but intense historical workshop...but there will be a lot of historians

¹ <http://projectsoutheastasia.com/in-defence-of-dr-pj-thum-and-academic-freedom-in-singapore>

² <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSc-BMoUZwccZVGzLdmerIk4-WGYC9X04ONTNcxTdGjNM9ueA/viewform>

from the meeting who will be signing the petition, and I am hopeful that several of them will be circulating our statement and the online letter for signature to their many colleagues here ...

7. I have asked for these emails to be released because they lift the curtain on what has been happening in secret. (*Annex B*)

What Dr Kreager's email reveals

8. Dr Kreager's email is revealing.

9. First, it strongly suggests that Dr Thum was involved in the Statement by Project Southeast Asia ("I have kept continuous contact with PJ on all of this, he has amongst other things suggested a draft reply for me"). If so, it is likely Dr Thum was involved in the Open Letter as well, since the Open Letter is remarkably similar to the Statement by Project Southeast Asia, with similar misstatements.

10. Second, Dr Kreager is actively campaigning for Dr Thum – among other things, by circulating the Statement by Project Southeast Asia and asking for signatures to the Open Letter ("the meeting is a small but intense historical workshop...but there will be a lot of historians from the meeting who will be signing the petition, and I am hopeful that several of them will be circulating our statement and the online letter for signature to their many colleagues here ...").

11. Third, Dr Kreager and Dr Thum have apparently been working closely together throughout this process.

12. The Statement by Project Southeast Asia and the Open Letter do not disclose any of this information. They give an appearance of spontaneous academic support for Dr Thum in his battle against parliamentarians in an ex-colony. Dr Kreager's email suggest this appearance is misleading. The "support" seems to have been primarily engineered by Dr Thum himself, working in close concert with Dr Kreager.

Who is Dr Kreager?

13. The public should also know about Dr Kreager's relationship with Dr Thum.

(1) Dr Kreager and Dr Thum are the only two directors of a company called Observatory Southeast Asia UK Ltd (OSEA UK). OSEA UK received money from entities linked to George Soros, and intended to set up a subsidiary to carry out political activities in Singapore. Dr Kreager and Dr Thum are thus not mere academic colleagues. They are also business partners and fellow activists engaged in a political project directed at Singaporeans.

(2) OSEA UK owns and manages the New Naratif website. The website carries political articles on Singapore. Dr Thum co-founded the website. Ms Kirsten Han is involved with the website as well.

- (3) OSEA UK was to be the parent company of OSEA Pte Ltd. Dr Thum and Ms Han were to be the directors of OSEA Pte Ltd. The Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority had refused registration of OSEA Pte Ltd, as the purposes of the proposed company were clearly political in nature and the company was going to carry out political activities in Singapore with the use of foreign monies collected by OSEA UK.
- (4) In addition to their business partnership, Dr Kreager appears to be Dr Thum's academic sponsor too. He is the chairman of Project Southeast Asia, where Dr Thum is the coordinator. Dr Kreager is also the Director of the Fertility and Reproduction Studies Group at Oxford's School of Anthropology, where Dr Thum is a visiting scholar.

14. It is not clear if those being asked to support the Project Southeast Asia Statement, and the Open Letter, know about the full extent of Dr Kreager's relationship with Dr Thum, or of Dr Thum's role in these documents. There is also no evidence that they have been informed of what actually happened at the Select Committee hearings; the misstatements in these documents suggest that they have not.

This is a serious matter

15. We must protect our independence and the institution of Parliament. The information now available suggests that there has been a coordinated attempt, with foreign actors involved, to try to influence and subvert our parliamentary processes. This is a serious matter.

16. This matter has arisen on top of the as yet unresolved matter of Dr Thum's precise academic affiliation to Oxford University. As I had indicated in my statement of 17 April 2018, Dr Thum has given himself a bewildering variety of titles in his evidence to the Select Committee -- from "Research Fellow in History" to "visiting professorship in anthropology" - - almost all of which turned out to be inaccurate, non-existent or misleading.



20 April 2018

Project South-East Asia

Dr Philip Kreager
Dr Gerry Bodeker
Professor Jeff Burley
Dr Peter Carey
Dr Constance McDermott
Dr Mari Mulyani
Dr Gillian Petrokofsky

DR. THUM PING TJIN'S EVIDENCE

I refer to your statement about Dr. Thum Ping Tjin's testimony to the Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods of Singapore's Parliament, which I chair.

2 Your statement is based on a factually inaccurate premise. You wrote that Dr Thum "found that the contents of his submission were not the object of [our] inquiry, and were never directly questioned." It would be surprising if Dr. Thum found it so, and it would be untrue if he had said that to you. It was Dr. Thum who submitted to us that the Singapore Government is the chief source of fake news in Singapore. In support of this contention Dr. Thum referred to his work on Operation Coldstore, and charged that the founding Prime Minister of Singapore, the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew, lied about the reasons for the operation. Dr. Thum was questioned specifically on this issue. It is not clear how you formed the opposite impression, which is simply untrue.

3 You also accused our committee of "impugning and restating empirical findings". The implication that research cannot be questioned runs counter to the basic principles of free speech and academic scholarship. You may also wish to actually watch the videos of Dr. Thum's testimony before making such statements. He was taken through the arguments that he made, and other material was also shown to him. The process was open and transparent. Dr. Thum was told that he was being questioned on matters that he had himself raised.

4 I am sure you know that sovereign legislators the world over exercise the right to question and clarify issues with witnesses. Sometimes hard questions are asked. You may be aware that recently Mr Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO of Facebook, faced two days of questioning by the US Congress; and

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Tel: 6332 6666 Fax: 6332 5526



Facebook representatives faced 5 hours of intense questioning by the Indonesian Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat. It is frankly presumptuous of you to tell Singapore parliamentarians how to do our jobs, and to do so on the basis of inaccurate and questionable premises.

5 Your other points are addressed by a statement that I made on 17 April 2018, which is annexed.

6 I am copying this reply to the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford.



CHARLES CHONG
Chairman of the Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods

Copy: Professor Louise Richardson
Vice-Chancellor, University of Oxford

enc

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.

PARL Selectcommittee (PARL)

From: Philip Kreager <philip.kreager@ihs.ox.ac.uk>
Sent: Sunday, 22 April 2018 8:06 AM
To: Jeff Burley; PARL Selectcommittee (PARL); philip.kreager@some.ox.ac.uk; gerrybodeker@gmail.com; jeff.burley@plants.ox.ac.uk; peter.carey@history.ox.ac.uk; Constance McDermott; Mari Mulyani; Gillian Petrokofsky
Subject: Re: Response to Statement from Project South East Asia

Hello Jeff,

I have kept continuous contact with PJ on all of this, he has amongst other things suggested a draft reply for me, which i will turn to on return...and which point I shall write to all the trustees on recent developments, which are several and positive. There is a lot of traction, but I need to think about next steps, which I can't just now, as the meeting is a small but intense historical workshop...but there will be a lot of historians from the meeting who will be signing the petition, and I am hopeful that several of them will be circulating our statement and the online letter for signature to their many colleagues here,

as ever,

Philip

From: Jeff Burley <jeff.burley@gtc.ox.ac.uk>
Sent: 21 April 2018 01:06:48
To: Philip Kreager; PARL Selectcommittee (PARL); philip.kreager@some.ox.ac.uk; gerrybodeker@gmail.com; jeff.burley@plants.ox.ac.uk; peter.carey@history.ox.ac.uk; Constance McDermott; Mari Mulyani; Gillian Petrokofsky
Subject: RE: Response to Statement from Project South East Asia

Dear Philip

Has PJ seen all the correspondence? If so, what is his response to this official message from Singapore? There comes a point in any discussion like this where you can just draw a line and say we tried. Pursuing things to the bitter end is more likely to be bitter for us than for a government and the University is unlikely to want a pitched battle..

Enjoy Washington. You are missing good gardening days here. Consequently I do not intend to run in the London marathon tomorrow.

Regards, Jeff Burley

From: Philip Kreager
Sent: Friday, April 20, 2018 12:42 PM
To: PARL Selectcommittee (PARL) <Selectcommittee@parl.gov.sg>; philip.kreager@some.ox.ac.uk; gerrybodeker@gmail.com; jeff.burley@plants.ox.ac.uk; Jeff Burley <jeff.burley@gtc.ox.ac.uk>; peter.carey@history.ox.ac.uk; Constance McDermott <constance.mcdermott@ouce.ox.ac.uk>; Mari Mulyani <mari.mulyani@ouce.ox.ac.uk>; Gillian Petrokofsky <gillian.petrokofsky@zoo.ox.ac.uk>
Subject: Re: Response to Statement from Project South East Asia

Dear Mr Chong,

Thank you for your email. I am currently in meetings in Washington, but will reply at the earliest opportunity.

yours sincerely,

Philip Kreager
Chair, Oxford Project Southeast Asia

From: PARL Selectcommittee (PARL) <Selectcommittee@parl.gov.sg>

Sent: 20 April 2018 01:32:33

To: philip.kreager@some.ox.ac.uk; gerrybodeker@gmail.com; jeff.burley@plants.ox.ac.uk; Jeff Burley; peter.carey@history.ox.ac.uk; Constance McDermott; Mari Mulyani; Gillian Petrokofsky

Cc: PARL Selectcommittee (PARL)

Subject: Response to Statement from Project South East Asia

Message Classification: *Restricted*

To: Project South-East Asia

Dr Philip Kreager
Dr Gerry Bodeker
Professor Jeff Burley
Dr Peter Carey
Dr Constance McDermott
Dr Mari Mulyani
Dr Gillian Petrokofsky

Dear Sir/Mdm

I have been directed by Mr Charles Chong, the Chairman of the Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods of the Singapore Parliament, to send the attached letter and an annex to you.

Yours faithfully,

