16 April 2018

In Defence of Dr PJ Thum and Academic Freedom in Singapore

We, the undersigned Trustees of Oxford Project Southeast Asia, wish to express in the strongest possible terms our concern regarding the treatment of Dr PJ Thum in recent hearings of the Singapore government’s Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods. Co-ordinator of Project Southeast Asia, and a member of its Board of Trustees, Dr Thum is a historian of Singapore’s independence struggle of the 1950s and 1960s, and since completing his doctorate at Oxford on this subject in 2011 has continued his research, notably reviewing documentation released recently by the British government on that era, and making his findings available to a wider audience. The documentation provided by his original and carefully sourced research has revealed events and relationships between Singapore’s leaders of the period that run counter to the view of the country’s history as now promoted by the Singapore government.

Earlier this year, Dr Thum responded to the public call, by the Select Committee, for submissions on the current state of media information and its reliability in Singapore. However, when called to interview by the Committee, he found that the contents of his submission were not the object of their inquiry, and were never directly discussed. Instead, Dr Thum was subjected to six hours of questioning by the Minister for Law and Home Affairs which focussed on the findings of his academic research. In the course of this interrogation, which may be viewed in full online at the Government of Singapore’s YouTube channel (https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLH2CR4s1lqygTiZqGHpuLxXfeVq_hPR-d), the Minister repeatedly expressed disdain for Dr Thum’s research, rephrasing its findings in general terms that misrepresented it, and attempting to get Dr Thum to agree to those rephrasings by attempting to force him to provide only yes/no answers. Dr Thum has since been subject to unflattering and one-sided reporting by the media.

Dr Thum’s research has already met the rigorous standards of examination at Oxford, and in peer review by fellow historical experts on the region. There is an evident irony in a Select Committee addressed to deliberate information falsehoods which proceeds by impugning and restating empirical findings. The implications for academic freedom, and for freedom of expression in Singapore, are very troubling. Instead of a hearing with the stated objective of securing truth in information, the actual conduct of its questioning appears designed to intimidate those who seek to publish the truth.

We call on the Select Committee to issue an immediate and public apology for this unacceptable treatment of Dr Thum.

Dr Philip Kreager (Chair)               Dr Peter Carey
Dr Gerry Bodeker                     Dr Mari Mulyani
Professor Jeff Burley                Dr Gillian Petrokofsky