

A Chat with Simon Chesterman

Simon Chesterman, former executive director of the Institute for International Law and Justice, is the new director of the Singapore Program. The dual-degree LL.M. program, conducted with the National University of Singapore, will matriculate its first class in May 2007. Chesterman is an expert on international law and the U.N. who has lived or worked in Afghanistan, China, Rwanda and Serbia. A native Australian, he spoke with senior writer Graham Reed about heading back East.

Why is the new LL.M. program in Singapore? Singapore presents the best gateway to Asia, which, economically, is incredibly globalized, but legally, in terms of international institutions, is not. There's a great deal of readiness to practice law across jurisdictions

but not yet to study law across jurisdictions. Together with the National University of Singapore Faculty of Law, we hope to be part of a transformation in that way of thinking.

The program offers a specialization in justice and human rights. Will that be a challenge in a country known to be strict? Yes, but I don't think it will be a danger. One of the things we're hoping will come out of this is a two-way conversation—that Singaporeans and other people in this program learn something from the Americans and the faculty who go over there, and that it's just as conceivable that we learn something from them.

You've been critical of the secretary-general and the United Nations, but honestly, is the U.N. just an unattainable ideal? The real problem is mismatched expectations. Is the U.N. an organization that does things or is it a diplomatic conference where member states get together and agree or disagree on shared policies? The answer is, of course, that it's both. But the confusion between those functions leads to disappointment. The U.N. can never be everything to everyone. To quote former Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, the U.N. was not created in order to bring us to heaven, but to save us from hell.

What will you miss most about New York? The multicultural lifestyle, the people who are passing through town and the fact that for my line of work, the U.N. is right around the corner. There's also Broadway, restaurants and so on. But with a one and a half year old child, my wife and I realized that we don't actually do many of these things. We'll miss the theory rather than the practice.

Your wife, Ming Tan, is Singaporean. How did you meet? We met getting our Ph.D.s at Oxford, then she moved to Singapore and I moved to New York via Yugoslavia. While I was doing research on East Timor, my then-boss allowed me to route each of my trips through Singapore with a week of leave. I eventually persuaded Ming to marry me and move to New York.

What will she do after your move? She runs a corporate foundation where her boss is Singaporean. She will move jobs within the organization and be based out of Singapore, so it works very well.

Are you and Ming looking forward to raising a child in Singapore? We're raising him to be bilingual in English and Chinese. That's going to be even easier in Singapore. In particular, having a family network will be useful. We'll have grandparents who are keen on spoiling our child rotten.

Who spoils children worse, Australian or Singaporean grandparents? In terms of toys, he's in a bidding war between both sets at the moment. The difference is best summarized not by grandparents, but by people you meet on the street. Our son was born very large and he's got a nice healthy belly. In Australia, people will be amused and rub his belly and call him a little Buddha. In Singapore, old people will pass us on the street and say, he's not eating enough.

In 2005, the Melbourne newspaper *The Age* listed you as one of "50 Australians Who Matter" along with Germaine Greer, Rupert Murdoch and Dame Edna. Are you mobbed by adoring fans when you go home? Mercifully, no. It was an enormous compliment, not least because of the category I was included in, "Stirrers," a wonderfully Australian slang term meaning those who challenge authority or speak truth to power.

You are aware that Hugh Jackman was just a runner-up? I'll now think twice about sending a copy to my mother.

What do you like to do when you're not thinking about peacekeeping and nation-building? I enjoy playing with my son, teaching him new words and how to walk, things like that. I run, travel, read. I write. When I was at Oxford, I wrote a play.

What's it about? It's about 50 minutes long. ■

