

Dame Victoria Sharp DBE, President of the Queen's Bench Division

My Lord, I have noticed that a tradition has grown up for occasions like this. An elderly male Silk on the downhill path to retirement, if not death, gets up to tell the Lord Chief Justice that thanks to the many cases in which he led the newly promoted or appointed judge and the way in which he skilfully guided him or her through the thickets of their early practice, this fortunate man or woman is now to adorn the Court of Appeal or the High Court Bench.

In my case it is true that retirement and even death may shortly cut short my practice at the Bar, although I hope not quite yet, but in the case of Dame Victoria Sharp we are venturing into radical territory. I have never led her in a case - which may go some way, but not very far, to explain why she is sitting alongside you as the new President of the Queen's Bench Division.

For Dame Victoria of course, and for her husband, for their four children, her mother, her brother, and her wider family, her appointment as President of the Queen's Bench Division is deservedly a matter of huge pride. I have no doubt too that were her father, Lord Sharp, alive today, and sadly he died some time before she took Silk, he would have been beaming with paternal pride, recognising that, as in his successful career, hard work, dedication, determination combined with the love and support of her family have delivered their rewards. I remember how happily he smiled at her wedding and I feel sure that he would have done the same today.

But, my Lord, if Dame Victoria's family have every reason to be pleased today, so too do her other family, we her friends from her old Chambers, One Brick Court. Our congratulations to her are heartfelt. It was there, not so long ago, that she began what became a stellar career at the Bar and on the Bench. She read law at Bristol. In 2014 her university made her an Honorary Doctor of Laws. It was made clear by the Orator that Bristol had been her first choice as an undergraduate. This was entirely unnecessary: Victoria Sharp does not understand the expressions "second choice" or "second best". Called to the Bar in 1979, she joined us as a tenant in our small, specialist media law Chambers after her pupillage with Richard Rampton and so began the story that brings us to today.

It was clear beyond any doubt that our new tenant was a worker. Our clerks knew that she could be relied on from a very early stage; no solicitor was let down by this barrister even if the instructions for tomorrow's case were delivered late; no judge was left disappointed by her failure to prepare, to marshal the facts and the law, or by a confused or incoherent presentation; no leader was ever left wondering why they'd been lumbered with a dunce for a junior; no client ever felt they had not got their money's worth in court or on paper; no opponent failed to notice that they faced an opponent, not a patsy, in court. Her thoroughness was not only legendary from her very beginnings at the Bar but has underscored her professional life as a more senior junior, as a Silk and as a judge. But let it not be thought that the new President of the QBD is a dullard or a drudge. Never make that mistake. My Lord, I am sure you haven't.

It is said, but this must be a lie, that when as an undergraduate Dame Victoria went to watch a murder trial at Bristol Crown Court, the details were so gruesome she fainted. Not much fazes her. As a heavily pregnant barrister appearing before the Judge in Chambers in Room 98, she went into labour. Although the baby was good enough to wait until she had finished her submissions, I suspect that both the judge and her opponent were mightily relieved that they did not have to act as midwives - and now that adult son is relieved that he wasn't called Duncan, Neill or Gatley.

I confessed at the outset that I had never led Victoria Sharp. I have though appeared in cases with and against her, perhaps most notably in the libel action brought by the late Lord Aldington against Nikolai Tolstoy over allegations that he had been a war criminal. It was tried before Mr Justice Michael Davies, not always a dispassionate forum, and a jury in 1989. The claimant was represented by Charles Gray QC and the barely 33-year-old Miss Sharp, led by Richard Rampton QC, appeared for Tolstoy. I appeared for his co-defendant, Nigel Watts. It was historically, factually and legally a totally absorbing case in which we were concerned with just 10 days of May 1945 (for me it would have been even more absorbing had my advice and my instructions not parted company leading to my client to sack me after a few weeks into the very long trial). These things happen. Lord Aldington was later awarded record libel damages of £1.5 million. It was a stressful case but throughout my involvement in the many months before the trial and the weeks of it, Victoria Sharp was supportive, collegiate, and a constant source of both encouragement and *Extra Strong Mints*. Time alone does not allow me to list the cases she appeared in both as a junior and, more particularly, in Silk but there were a good many of them, mostly, but not always, for defendant newspapers requiring a lot of work, patience and an ability to get on and do the job on behalf of demanding and sometimes not entirely rational clients whose interest in the facts was marginal and who occasionally found the distinction between what was interesting to the public and what was in the public interest inconvenient.

I also appeared before her Ladyship in the Court of Appeal when I was Solicitor General. The courtesy with which she listened to my submissions was not artificial but nor was she held back by our friendship from pulling me up if my arguments strayed from the point at issue. Her focus on the essential, on the matters that need to be decided, will, I know, assist her in the administrative work that lies ahead of her just as it has enabled her to get to the heart of the cases she had to try at first instance or deal with on appeal. Her judgments in the High Court and the Court of Appeal in areas of law inside and outside the law of defamation repay careful study and display a humanity and exemplary care for justice.

My Lord, for me and for all of us who have grown up and developed as barristers at One Brick Court today is a bitter sweet day. We are overjoyed and proud to be able to congratulate one of our own, Dame Victoria, on her appointment as President of the Queen's Bench Division. That she is the first woman to hold that office is, I suspect, a matter of delightful indifference to her, but our great joy at her success is tempered only by the fact that our Chambers, which has nurtured such superlative legal talent as her over its long history, closed yesterday after

nearly 150 years. We have all found new homes at 5RB, at Doughty Street, at Ely Place, as in-house lawyers at newspapers and at solicitors' firms, in retirement, and in my case at 4 Pump Court, but as our little band disperses we ask you to allow us this one indulgence: that with the appointment of Dame Victoria Sharp as the new President we can plant our standard on the judicial heights and that on it we can embroider her name as well as the names of just some of her predecessors, mentors and contemporaries from Chambers who, like her, have helped to make the law of England: Fraser, Slade, Duncan, Faulks, Cusack, Neill, Hirst, Hoolahan, Hartley, Brittan, Rampton, Previtte, Eady, Walker, Shaw, Shields, Moloney, Caldecott.

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