



SPEECH BY NICK VINEALL KC, VICE CHAIR OF THE BAR, AT THE SWEARING IN OF THE NEW ATTORNEY GENERAL VICTORIA PRENTIS

16 November 2022

BEGINS

My Lord,

On behalf of the Bar of England and Wales, may I welcome the Attorney General at her swearing in and declaration.

Mark Fenhalls KC who is the Chair of the Bar offers his apologies: he is on Bar Council business in Nairobi.

But his absence has the happy consequence that it falls to me as Vice Chair to welcome you and it is a particular delight to do so because you are an established and distinguished member of the profession of which you now become leader.

You were called to the Bar in 1995 by Middle Temple. You were a pupil of the present Lord Chief Justice. It is many levels above my pay grade to pass any comment whatsoever in relation to that. But you were also a pupil of Dominic Grieve who subsequently went on to serve with great distinction as Attorney General between 2010 and 2014, and who undoubtedly understood that the key function of the Attorney is to act as an independent and impartial legal advisor to, and critical friend of, the government of which they are a member.

After pupillage you practised as a barrister for 17 years. That practice was in TSol or as it became the Government Legal Department. You were always a litigator, with a large part of your work in judicial review. Much of your work was for the MoJ but you also worked for the MoD on private law claims involving service personnel. You were well versed in Convention Claims and the workings of the Human Rights Act.

You were promoted to the Senior Civil Service as a team leader in a job share arrangement. You made that job share work, and in so doing provided a role model for others (and being a role model is a point to which I will return in a moment). You were a champion of the GLD's trainee scheme for young solicitors and barristers. Until November 2014 you were head of

the Government's Justice and Security team advising on the military, prisons and national security matters, and representing the Government in court.

You entered Parliament in 2015, as MP for the constituency of Banbury. Banbury is a seat which has not changed its political persuasion since the first world war and indeed has had only 5 MPs in the last hundred years.

In February 2020 you were appointed Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Environment and Rural Affairs (Defra) and in September 2021, you became Minister of State at Defra where you were responsible for Farming, Fisheries and Food.

You had a very brief stint at the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) before being appointed Attorney General in October.

I know that - just like your second pupil supervisor (and I daresay like your first – but then I am in danger of straying beyond my pay grade again) you understand that the role of the historic office of Attorney is to advise the government impartially and to provide counsel to it on its legislative programme in the role of critical friend. We know that you will do that in the finest traditions of this office; and we hope that your advice and wise counsel will be acted upon.

Barristers, when acting as such, must always maintain their independence. We cannot hope properly to advise our clients if we allow our independence to be compromised.

The Attorney General has traditionally been regarded as the leader of the Bar and that is an important and valuable convention which I very much wish to see continue.

I venture to suggest that your status as leader of a profession *of independent lawyers* is valuable precisely because it underlines the uniquely independent nature of your role within government.

And your status as leader of our profession also means that we greatly value the presence of the Attorney and/or the Solicitor General at Bar Council meetings. I hope you will not be too disappointed to learn that next year instead of six meetings on Saturdays, in 2023 only three will be on Saturdays and others at more family-friendly times.

And in your new role as Attorney you will again be an important role model, this time, because of your background in the Government Legal Department, an important role model and inspiration for the 3000 or so barristers who practice as employed barrister and who form such an important part of our profession. We celebrate the vital contribution of the

employed Bar every year at an awards dinner and that is an event to which you would be warmly welcomed if your diary were to permit.

We greatly look forward to working with you, with the Solicitor-General, and with your departmental team, alongside our work with Ministers and officials in the MoJ.

I emphasise that the Bar Council does not take party political positions. Everything that we do in our interactions with Government is directed to ensuring that Government operates in accordance with the Rule of Law, that the justice system is properly resourced and efficiently delivered, and that legislation is properly considered so that it meets the necessary standards of predictability and certainty, and respects the fact that it should be Parliament, and not Government, that makes and unmakes our laws.

In all that you do to achieve these things you can count on our support.

I said at the beginning that I was speaking on behalf of the Bar of England and Wales. But my friends and opposite numbers the Chair of the Bar of Northern Ireland Moira Smyth KC and the Dean of the Faculty of Advocates in Scotland Roddy Dunlop KC have seen these remarks, and they have asked me to say that they associate themselves with them, and wish to join me in congratulating you on your appointment, and welcoming you as Attorney General.

ENDS