

Admissions Ceremony 12 November 2001

Chief Justice's observations

At commencement of ceremony

Mr Searles, we note your appearance here this morning on behalf of the Solicitors' Board. I wish to use the opportunity to speak briefly about the contribution of the Boards, of which the public may know little.

The Solicitors' Board, for example, receives and processes applications for the admission of solicitors, ensuring applicants possess the requisite qualifications and drawing the court's attention to any possible problems. The Board has the power to deal itself with certain irregularities. It has seven members, of whom five are practising solicitors, and it meets every six weeks. The Barristers' Board carries out a comparable role in relation to the admission of barristers.

The members of both boards fulfil this publicly important role voluntarily. They are to be commended for that dedication. The system, frankly, could not work without the Boards.

There may be an apparent formalism about today's ceremony, but the overall process of admission is by no means perfunctory. Today sees the culmination of a process by which, with the Boards' assistance, and following meticulous consideration of the applications, the court, in admitting new practitioners, signals its confidence that they are fit and proper persons to practise.

Mr Searles, you have been a member of the Solicitors' Board for 11 years and its chairman for 6 years. You are now retiring from the Board. I record the gratitude of the Judges for your excellent and lengthy service.

Legal practitioners voluntarily discharge many publicly beneficial roles. Any perception of a self-centred profession is unjustified.

In warmly commending you, Mr Searles, I record the thanks of the Judges, on behalf of the community, to all practitioners who, without seeking particular recognition, unselfishly deploy their talent and time in the public interest.

To the newly admitted practitioners

The considerable formality of this occasion highlights the significance of the step you have just taken. After years of concentrated academic effort and practical training, your accomplishment leads you – perhaps you are sighing, “at last” - into the legal profession: a fine personal achievement, and gratifying also, no doubt, to your families and friends, many of whom we welcome here this morning. You have our congratulations (... and we especially commend the honours graduates and note with pleasure the admission of Judges' former Associates).

Congratulations are very much in order today, but I expect you will also be pondering the gravity of the step you have taken.

The last admissions ceremony in this court occurred, 9 weeks ago, on Monday 10 September. The following fateful day the world was devastated by events which laid bare the ultimate vulnerability of even democratic society. On 10 September we reminded the newly admitted practitioners, as is our custom, of the role of all lawyers in safeguarding the rule of law. Centuries of human history demonstrate the rule of law as the key to the maintenance of civilised society.

The “rule of law” comprehends three aspects: first, the making of the law by those responsible to the people through the democratic process, namely the legislature; second, the people's acceptance of the legitimacy of that law, with any rejection being signalled through the ballot box; and third, the application of that law by the courts, with the people acknowledging the binding authority of judicial determinations.

The events of 11 September reminded us all of the precariousness of human life. For lawyers, they additionally underscored our professionally confirmed obligation to promote the rule of law: fearlessly to uphold the law in the pursuit of a client's rights, and to do our best to foster community awareness of the overwhelming importance of the stipulation. I hope you will play your own important part in that process, especially in these perilous times. A young, vigorous point of view, properly informed and carefully expressed, may be intrinsically influential.

I turn to matters which, while challenging, are manifestly less troubling. Over the last fortnight I have represented the Judges at two events where firms of solicitors have publicly manifested their determination, through particular important initiatives, to promote the public interest – and significantly, without personal financial reward. Also, last month, the Caxton Legal Centre celebrated its 25th anniversary. That is an organisation which renders valuable legal services largely gratis, thanks to more than 200 altruistically oriented, community minded lawyers.

I urge you to recognise public service as the ideal which distinguishes your newly acquired professional status, and so far as practicable, to use your considerable skills to alleviate the plight of others less fortunate. The increasing tendency within the profession to carry out legal work on a pro bono basis is most encouraging, and should be lending vitality to the public's perception of a profession which we justifiably describe as noble.

Drawing these themes together, I ask you to remember the goal of public service which should impel you. Foster a realisation of your potential role in safeguarding the rule of law. Serve your clients well. Respect the authority of the court, towards which you must exhibit the utmost candour. And spare talented effort also for the weak, the marginalised, and the friendless.

If you follow this respectful advice, you will, personally, exemplify the nobility which continues to distinguish your new profession institutionally.

Go forward now with our sanguine encouragement.
