

Introduction

May I first thank the Lord Chief Justice for his warm welcome.

I would also like to welcome back the Attorney General to her post following her maternity leave – I hope your gorgeous daughter Gabriella is allowing her Mum at least some sleep.

The country owes the Lord Chief and the entire judiciary a debt of gratitude, for keeping the wheels of the justice system rolling throughout this awful pandemic.

I look forward to working with the Lord Chief and the other members of the Bench here today – as well as judges up and down the country.

And as a solicitor, I look forward to working with and supporting our brilliant legal professions, our solicitors and barristers, to tackle the challenges we face.

With that in mind, I'm also delighted to welcome my friend and highly esteemed colleague, Alex Chalk, to his new role as the Solicitor General.

As a Law Officer, he holds a historic and very important role in our democracy – ensuring governments act lawfully, while overseeing the vital work of our prosecuting authorities.

In truth, I am sorry to lose him from the Ministry of Justice, but buoyed to know that he will bring all his usual energy, diligence and pizzazz to his new role.

I would also like to thank my predecessor, Robert Buckland, for his deep commitment to supporting the judiciary and the rule of law.

I swore I wouldn't mention Brexit. So please forgive me, but my abiding memory of working with Robert ... in the aftermath of the EU referendum with all of its polarisation ... where, despite being friends, we ... how shall I say it ... viewed the brief from different vantage points ... But we worked together in a harmonious and, dare I say it, rather jolly way, through a rather bad-tempered period of British politics, including on the legal and judicial aspects of the Withdrawal Agreement Bill, when we were both on the Bill team, during its passage through Parliament.

It reminded me at the time of the words of the great John Stuart Mill, "He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that."

Of course, that tenet is central to the common law view of justice ... a fundamental, if sometimes overlooked, secret to its success.

I have also always felt that is a quintessentially British disposition, and it wouldn't hurt to have a bit more of it in our public debate... including today as we bounce back from this appalling pandemic, which at least has served to galvanise some national unity of spirit.

In any case, from the unique position of this office which I am now honoured to hold, I sense that Mill's maxim will be quite an important lodestar on the road ahead.

Oath to defend the rule of law

In preparation for my swearing in, my wonderful officials did their ritual due diligence to see if there was anything particularly unique in my appointment.

In truth, there wasn't much. The best they could valiantly come up with was to point out that that I am the first Lord Chancellor to hold a black belt third Dan in Karate, and suggest that this was a sign of how tenaciously I would defend the rule of law.

I do hope it won't come to that, not least because I had a hip replacement a few years ago.

But what I can say is that I take the Oath that I have sworn very seriously.

And I will be unflinching in upholding the long-held principles of the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary.

As we all know, this is not just a matter of legal form, but a pledge to safeguard the fairness and freedoms which in our society are safeguarded under the umbrella of the rule of law and access to justice.

For your part, you, the judiciary, bring huge knowledge, a wealth of experience and erudite expertise to the judgments that you make.

I know that these can often be challenging and complex cases.

And I want to thank you for all of the dedication, the diligence and the personal care with which you all approach those decisions.

Past experience

There are many finer legal minds in the room today than mine. But I hope that I can offer at least some range of perspective.

I started my training as a solicitor on secondment at Liberty, spending time visiting many young men in prison, who seemed to have tripped up into their fate, rather being particularly malevolent.

I believe in firm and robust criminal justice, but also in providing the springboard of opportunities to divert young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds away from gangs, drugs and violence.

I spent many years as a volunteer and then Trustee at Fight for Peace, a martial arts and boxing charity in Newham seeing how this can be achieved, transforming the life chances of those young people, to the enormous benefit of their communities.

Later, I served for six years as a Foreign Office legal adviser at the time of the acute tensions surrounding the second Iraq War.

I am not seeking to rake over old coals, merely explaining how an abiding and passionate commitment to the rule of law has been forged in my head and my heart... throughout my career.

Above all, as we pursue reform to improve the conditions of our society, whether that be credible community sentences or improving the family law system, I've learnt the overwhelming need for perseverance.

In 2004, when I was posted as a young war crimes lawyer to the Hague, I had the opportunity to negotiate the UK-UN sentence enforcement agreement for the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

At the time, we all wondered if we'd ever see justice for those responsible for the worst war crimes Europe had seen since the Holocaust.

It seemed a rather forlorn hope amidst the ashes of Yugoslavia at that time. But we kept plugging away.

We signed the agreement, and I'm proud to say that 17 years on, this year, Radovan Karadžić is serving his prison sentence in a British jail for the crime of genocide ... a sign of Global Britain as an even stronger force for good in the world.

As the son of a refugee who fled the Holocaust ... this is something that I, and I believe we as a country, should take great pride in.

But, I do hope you'll forgive me if I am restless to deliver a little more swiftly ... when it comes to Her Majesty's government's domestic agenda, here at home.

Priorities as Justice Secretary

Because, we have a lot to be getting on with. I am determined to carry on the great work underway ...

To increase court capacity ... because as we bounce back from the pandemic we need to harness and lock in the digital lessons we've learned during COVID.

To see through our prison building programme ... because incarceration protects the public from the most serious and dangerous offenders, and that is one of my overriding priorities.

To create a prison system that properly rehabilitates prisoners ... because reducing re-offending is the most sustainable way to cut crime... and we know, we have the empirical basis, to support offenders through training, alcohol and drug rehabilitation, strengthening family bonds, job opportunities and ensuring a roof over the heads of those discharged from prison.

I want to deliver a step-change in the support, and coordination of support for victims too... because we have a duty of care to the most vulnerable in society.

Throughout, I will use my time in this position to continue safeguarding judicial independence - supporting a clear separation of powers between the three branches of government.

Our justice system has been tested over the past 18 months. It has continued to operate throughout the pandemic and I'm very proud that we were the first jurisdiction anywhere to resume in-person jury trials... an important symbol to the world.

Having all been cooped up for so long, I confess I am restless ... determined to build on the rapid innovations that the courts have overseen to help us tackle the impact of coronavirus – not least the rapid roll out of remote technology across the estate to beam people into courtrooms – something that was a just a policy proposal when I was Courts Minister back in 2017.

This is a real testament to the judges, court staff and those in the legal sector who worked tirelessly to ensure that, while everything else appeared to be grinding to a halt, victims were supported and criminals were brought to justice.

Of course, those cases cannot progress without the dedication of our lawyers and judges, and I want to take this opportunity to personally thank all those who worked and continue to work so hard to see that justice is done. You went the extra mile, and your commitment and dedication is enormously appreciated.

Conclusion

The evolution and endurance of this great office of state gives a truly privileged insight into the principles upon which our justice system hinges, and our society depends upon.

The foundations of those principles remain strong, and the roots run deep.

But, if we reform, if we adapt, and if we can realise the enormous potential on display across our professions, I have no doubt that we can go from strength to strength, and write an even brighter chapter for the next generation... inspired by the idealism of their age.

So, I will strive to maintain the unrivalled international reputation for excellence that we, on these shores, have when it comes to our legal services, our judiciary and our justice system at large.

And here at home, I want our citizens to feel a renewed confidence in their every-day experience British justice ... as a system that is fair, open and accessible, one that protects victims, makes our streets safer and serves the public, in a way that is both true to our values, and equipped for the challenges that lie ahead.

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