



FOUR FIRST WOMEN JUDGES

In conversation

This unique event at Gray's Inn on 5 July was organised by 'First 100 Years' – a project, supported by the Law Society and the Bar Council, 'charting the journey of women in law since 1919' – to kick start the 2019 centenary celebrations of the arrival of women barristers and solicitors.

Headlined 'Four Continents, One City, One Global Event & A First for the Legal Profession', the event brought together the President of the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom, Baroness Hale, the Chief Justice of Australia, Susan Kiefel, former Chief Justice of Ghana, Georgina Wood, and former Chief Justice of Canada, Beverley McLachlin – all four Benchers of Gray's Inn. They were all the first women to be appointed to their roles.

Seated informally on the dais in Hall, these remarkable and inspiring women were introduced to a packed audience by Dame Linda Dobbs and then chatted about their lives and how they came to a career in the law and what that had meant to them. The discussion highlighted the challenges that have faced – and sometimes still face – women in the legal profession.

Beverley McLachlin told of the lack of encouragement given to girls, when social traditions all were still telling girls of her age: 'You can't really make it. It's a man's world out there.' Susan Kiefel recalled a conversation with one judge who suggested she might give up her career for her family, and Brenda Hale described how she had been left feeling humiliated after being rejected for professorships despite believing she was the most qualified applicant.

Though these women faced setbacks, their subsequent careers are evidence of their determination and ability. Georgina Wood said she had been motivated by a desire to help people and 'to settle differences'. As Chief Justice in a developing country she made up her mind to protect the independence of the judiciary 'come what may', and she

described as a 'very trying moment' the time when some of her colleagues were accused of corruption. Beverley McLachlin was herself accused of impropriety by the Canadian Prime Minister, which was a very difficult time for her. However, she was eventually completely vindicated: 'What was good about it was that the legal institutions and ordinary Canadian men and women were outraged at the attack.' Reassuringly, Susan Kiefel said that she had enjoyed her time at the Bar, though it had had its 'usual terrifying moments', and that she had found being a judge more satisfying. It was, she said, people as much as events that had shaped her way of thinking as a judge.

The position of women in the law received some attention, with Brenda Hale pointing out that, as women, people reacted to them in different ways and that the experience of being a woman – representing half the human race – was just as important to feed into the practice of the law as was the experience of men. Georgina Wood saw men as partners, not competition, and urged them to understand the challenges and concerns women faced.

The panel also spoke of their inspirations, with Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan identified as formative influences. Beverley McLachlin highlighted the importance of diversity: 'I grew up in a very diverse community ... that led to an appreciation of the place of everybody in the world.' Both she and Brenda Hale credited their parents with shaping their lives, with Brenda Hale outlining what an inspiration her mother had been in picking up her career and providing for her school girl daughters after their father died.

There was also advice for future generations of women. Beverley McLachlin said: 'When you think the bottom's falling out of your world, think again. You may be underestimating yourself, you may be running up against a prejudiced opinion that doesn't matter. My advice to younger women is to keep your head up, plough on and you'll win in the end.'

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She also reassured parents worried about juggling the responsibilities of career and family: 'When I had a child, it was extremely stressful. Not because I thought I couldn't do my job...but because I thought I was the worst parent in the world. Years later my son said, get over it Mom, you were great.' Georgina Wood advised: 'Do the best that you can, in the given circumstances. Your work and your integrity will always turn for you.'

Dana Denis-Smith, founder of First 100 Years, closed the event, saying:

'The first 100 years' motivation has always been to go beyond women as citizens. We celebrate women as professionals – women who are independent and able to build careers and be the role models you have heard today.'

Then it was out into South Square to enjoy some refreshment and continue the discussion.

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