

## **Valedictory address by Mr Kevin Martin for Lord Woolf: Retirement of the Lord Chief Justice: Mr Kevin Martin, President of the Law Society of England and Wales**

Lord Chancellor, Lord Chief Justice, My Lords:

It is a great privilege to have the honour, on behalf of the Law Society, to congratulate Lord Woolf on his retirement from the office of Lord Chief Justice.

Lord Woolf's tenure of the office has been an historic and inspiring one. I can think of no Lord Chief Justice - indeed no judge - who has so brilliantly combined leadership, courage, intellect, generosity of spirit, warmth and commitment to public service.

Lord Woolf has always been a great friend to the Law Society and to the solicitors' profession.

This was particularly evident when he held the office of Master of the Rolls. In that job he once described himself, quite memorably, as the "Godfather" of the solicitor's profession. We weren't sure at first how to take that, but in the end we decided he could only be using the term in its most benign sense. It is, in fact, the perfect way to describe the Master of the Rolls' relationship with the solicitors' profession - an objective, wise friend, experienced in the ways of the world, who provides advice and guidance at the moments when it is most needed and most welcome.

As Lord Chief Justice, Lord Woolf's commitment to justice, individual liberty and the rule of law has been indefatigable.

Few have shown such tireless and determined dedication to these principles, which are the foundations upon which our democracy is built. The recent period of constitutional reform has revealed how deep is his commitment to these principles.

Many people were in agreement that the time was ripe for modernising some aspects of the constitution, but inevitably such changes must be approached with the greatest care. The reforms proposed by the Government would have far-reaching consequences. They needed to be properly scrutinised and their likely impact carefully examined.

Lord Woolf led that process with great skill. Putting the public interest above his own he deferred his retirement for two years, in order that he could give effective leadership, and so that the process of scrutiny and negotiation would not be undermined by a change in Lord Chief Justice at a crucial moment. The "concordat" that he agreed between the Lord Chancellor and the judiciary was extremely important and helped ensure proper protection of the judiciary's independence, and a degree of involvement in the discussions relating to the judiciary that had been sought for a number of years.

That Lord Woolf should be so determined and so resolute should have come as no surprise to anyone. He has a personal reputation for friendliness, openness and generosity. But he also has a reputation for both his liberal instincts and for having the courage of his convictions, speaking out and acting where others might not always have the strength of character to do so.

Following the Strangeways riots in 1990, he was appointed, with Sir Stephen Tumin, to conduct the subsequent inquiry. His conclusions were uncompromising and the report shone a bright light into the dark corners of the policy on prisons, highlighting past failures and making radical proposals for change.

Later in the 1990s, Lord Woolf's boldness and his vision found expression in a rather different arena, and his legacy there is perhaps even more significant.

Reference has already been made to the "Woolf Reforms". This review by Lord Woolf of the workings of the civil justice system was radical in its consequences and resulted in a completely new approach to non-criminal cases. Fairness, efficiency and common sense ran through his proposals like the letters in seaside

rock. What was so striking about the approach taken by Lord Woolf was that he did not seem to be overburdened by precedent and the old way of doing things - as lawyers sometimes can be. He consulted extremely widely - judges, practitioners and users of the courts - through a series of roadshows up and down the country. His changes helped reduce the number of cases going to court, speed up the court process for many and introduce a much more open approach to litigation. It was a breath of fresh air if ever there was one.

Lord Woolf's love for the law and dedication to justice is clearly contagious.

With two sons at the Bar and one a solicitor he has not only been a leader in the legal professions, he has also increased their numbers too. There are some, I know, in the press, who feel that we already have enough lawyers in this country, but all I can say in response is that if Lord Woolf's offspring have even a tenth of their father's humanity and ability, this is something for which we all should be grateful.

Lord Woolf will be sorely missed by the solicitors' profession.

Talking to anyone who has encountered him the same words come up over and over again - 'humane', 'natural', 'kind', 'friendly', 'clever', 'generous', 'fair'. And there cannot be a lawyer in this country whose work has not been touched by his work. He has left his mark on the law and he has left his mark as a human being. He is an example and inspiration to us all.

My only worry for his retirement is whether it will really deserve that name. He has admitted that he will be lecturing both at home and abroad, and when pressed further about leisure activities he said he hoped to spend more time in the House of Lords. That he has expressed an ambition to take up golf is something of a relief!

Lawyers can sometimes be derided for the dry, pedantic nature of their work. And, truth to tell, we sometimes give oxygen to that myth in the practice of our profession.

But Lord Woolf, above all, has a feeling for the law that reminds us, lawyers and the public alike, what the law is really about.

Justice for all, each individual treated equally and fairly, by his fellow man and by the state, each person entitled to respect, dignity and a voice. And that is not dry or pedantic - it is the stuff of life. Lord Woolf has kept those ideals close at hand in all his work and I hope he is recognised, most of all, for that.

It is a great privilege to participate in this splendid occasion this morning. And I am fortunate indeed to have recently assumed office as President of the Law Society and thus, on behalf of all solicitors, to have the opportunity to pay homage to Lord Woolf for his immense achievements over a long and distinguished career.

My Lord, thank you.

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