

Valedictory address on his retirement: Lord Woolf: Lord Woolf, The Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales

Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State, I thank you for accepting my invitation to sit on the bench in the Lord Chief Justice's Court today. Mr Attorney, Chairman of the Bar, President of the Law Society, I thank you for being present today. I thank you all for your over generous remarks which I greatly appreciate.

Indeed, the generosity of your comments was such that, as I listened to them, I was reminded that one of the valuable pieces of advice that Marguerite has given me when I was worried about the correctness of a judgment I had given or a sentence that I had passed - it was that it is never too late to change your mind! Perhaps, I thought, I have made a mistake. Should I emulate Maria Callas and once again postpone my retirement? This was a momentary thought. I am happy to assure you I know that my decision to retire is one decision that is undoubtedly right. It is time to go.

Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State. For over two years now you and I have been involved in almost continuous dialogue. As you have indicated in what you have said today our views have not always immediately coincided. However, although there are still issues on which we disagree, as a result of our discussions we have always in the end found a way forward which we could both accept which was in the interests of the justice system. As a result our personal relationship has never suffered and I have found that you have been an excellent Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State to work with.

I would also like to pay credit to you, Mr Attorney. The burdens of your office are immense and you are performing them with great skill and integrity. In particular, you have set a splendid example, which has been much appreciated by the judiciary, by finding the time to appear as an advocate in some of the most difficult and demanding cases to come before the Courts in recent years.

Mr Mansfield, the responsibilities of your office as Chairman of the Bar are also heavy, particularly at this time. I hope your efforts on behalf of the bar will result in solutions being found for the problems with which you are faced that are in the interests of both the profession and the public as a whole. It gives me particular pleasure that it is a member of the Chambers to which I once belonged that is carrying out your present onerous responsibilities. I am bound to confess that what you had to say about the two conflicting advices is true. I am sure that during the time when you were working for me as a pupil you would not have allowed such a mistake to occur!

Mr President, you are just in the process of embarking on your year of office. I am wholly confident that it will be immensely rewarding both for you and the profession. Certainly the solicitor side of the profession is not going to want for an able advocate during your term of office.

As the accounts of my career that have been given indicate, I have been extraordinarily fortunate. When I embarked on my career in the law 50 years ago I could not have had any conception that it would turn out as it has.

However, what for me has been the most rewarding part of that career has not been holding this office or that office, but the people I have had the privilege of working with. Over 50 years I cannot remember ever been treated other than with generosity and kindness. No colleague ever displayed jealousy or prejudice. Everyone has gone out of their way to be supportive. I do not believe I know of any other world where it would be possible to have the experience that I have had. The fact is that I have had the exceptional privilege of working with exceptional people.

This is true of my life in Chambers, as a High Court Judge, as a judge of the Court of Appeal, in the House of Lords and as Master of the Rolls, and it is of course true of all those with whom I have worked as Lord Chief Justice.

I have pondered long as to whether I should try and mention individually those who have been especially

good to me, but it would be invidious if not impossible for me do so. I hope they will accept that without exception I am grateful to them. I hope they know how I admire them and how I value each one of them. I hope they will therefore forgive my failure to mention their names.

Particularly since, as the office of Chief Justice evolves, the size of my staff has had to grow dramatically in numbers as a glance in the dock will confirm. Together they made an impossible job possible. Whether it was as a messenger, usher, shorthand writer, security officer, lawyer, clerk, private secretary, or district, circuit, High Court or Court of Appeal judge, or as a Head of Division, or as a member of the extended family, Deputy Chief Justice or Presiding Judge, they have all been superbly loyal and immensely hard working and real friends. Over the last few days I have visited the majority of offices in this building expressing my thanks. It has been a most moving experience.

It is really pleasing to know that the new outstanding team that will be led by Nicholas Phillips will receive, through all the great changes ahead, the same loyal support that I have had. It is critical that they do so if the public are to continue to receive in the future the same remarkably high standards of justice as I believe they enjoy today. I wish the new team every success.

That leaves me with one final matter that I wish to say.

It is simply this. Whatever I have achieved could not have been achieved without the unfaltering love and support of one individual. Indeed without that support I would probably not have coped with the strains to which I am sure you will accept that I have been subject from time to time. The person I refer to is of course Marguerite. Marguerite and our immediate family who I am delighted are here today have been the solid foundation of my 50-year career so far in the law.

Thank you all.

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