



The Law Society

Interview

His Honour Judge Phillip Sycamore

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solicitors

Whatever stereotype you may have of a senior judge, it's unlikely that one of their characteristics will be that they 'fluffed' their 'A' levels. But that is something that Phillip Sycamore mentioned when discussing his route into the judiciary, the role of a modern Tribunals Service and the opportunities it offers solicitors thinking of treading the judicial path.

After 'A' levels, things did take a more conventional route. A law degree at Holborn College (now part of Westminster University) and then articles in an East End legal aid firm. He returned to his native North-West where eventually he and a college friend set up their own firm and by 1997 he was President of the Law Society of England and Wales

So why move into the judiciary?

'Two reasons really, in the broadest sense I wanted to give of my best to the profession. But on a personal level, I had been lucky enough to have a fulfilling career as a solicitor. A move into the judiciary gave me the chance for a change of emphasis as I became a decision maker. Plus it was a challenging prospect; at that time very few solicitors had a judicial post.'

Sycamore also makes the point that back then you had to do your own legwork to find out information about the posts and the process; 'there was no JAC website!'

His first position was as a Deputy Registrar (now a Deputy District Judge) followed by Assistant Recorder and then as a Recorder. In 2001 he became a Circuit Judge on the Northern Circuit. His background in Mental Health however (his firm held one of the first LSC Mental Health franchises) meant an affinity with that subject and after a period as the Liaison Judge for the Mental Health Review Tribunal he was appointed in November 2008, through a JAC competition, to his current role as President of the Health, Education and Social Care Chamber. This was one of the first Chambers introduced as a result of the unification of the Tribunals system through the Tribunals, Courts and Enforcement Act 2007. A hugely positive step according to Sycamore, 'not only did it mean a more consistent approach across the range of Tribunals but it also introduced a mixed judiciary - with full time judges sitting alongside the fee-paid for the first time in the Chamber. The fee-paid judges are essential to the service but having a number of salaried judges means that we can offer more, for example effective case management which in areas such as mental health is key for the user of the service.'

Changes like this stem from a recognition of the importance of the Tribunals system to justice in this country and help to dispel a myth, which has over time largely been eroded but still pops up occasionally; that Tribunals are in some way the poor cousin of the Courts.

It is something that Phillip Sycamore feels very strongly about, 'Tribunals cover a wide range of issues from immigration to welfare benefits to mental health to tax. Tribunal Judges hear cases where the protection of the public or the liberty of an individual is at stake as well as those which affect big business. It is worth bearing in mind as well that most members of the public are far more likely to come into contact with the Tribunals system than the civil courts.'

Judge Sycamore identifies a number of other reasons why the Tribunals Service is attractive for solicitors. Flexibility on two levels is, he explains, key.

'The large number of fee-paid posts means that you can book your sitting days one at a time rather than in large blocks. It's this sort of flexibility that could make a sceptical firm possibly warm to judicial appointments. From the perspective of the individual flexibility is also possible with salaried

posts where for example the individual may have caring responsibilities. More roles can now be part time and there are greater opportunities to arrange flexible sitting patterns.'

The Tribunals Service is also committed to supporting its judges and it is something that Judge Sycamore is clearly proud of.

'It is an area where we are ahead. Formal appraisal systems are now widespread, which is viewed positively by all concerned, 'Getting feedback on performance and knowing where your strengths and weaknesses lie is so important. I look back to my time as an Assistant Recorder; nobody ever told me how I was doing or gave me suggestions for how I could improve.'

The other attraction of the Tribunals Service is that it provides an opportunity to step out of the legal world.

'It's hugely stimulating to sit with colleagues from a range of backgrounds. You could be sitting with a consultant psychiatrist or an educationalist. It's a glimpse of a world you may never otherwise see and this kind of experience can benefit both personal and professional development.'

As for advice to would be candidates, Sycamore is clear.

'I applaud the progress we have seen in opening up the process and increasing transparency through the work of the JAC. The support of The Law Society remains crucial although of course there will always be more that both can do. However it isn't only down to those organisations. The candidates themselves have a responsibility to research the posts that they are interested in and devote some time to the application process. Talk to Judges – most will be keen to share their experiences. I hear some solicitors saying that they don't know how to complete a competency based application. These are intelligent people; there are sources of information on how to improve job applications, they should be able to access them and use them appropriately.'

Tough words perhaps, but good advice as the world of judicial appointments is increasingly competitive, although if the words of Phillip Sycamore are anything to go by, well worth joining.