



The Law Society

Pen portrait

District Judge (Magistrates' Court) Tan Ikram

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supporting
solicitors

1. Please describe your current judicial role and the route you have taken to get there

I was appointed a full time District Judge in the Magistrates' Court earlier this year after having sat part time for five odd years. I most recently practiced as a solicitor-advocate dealing with criminal defence and prosecution work but was previously a Magistrates' Court Clerk. I started my judicial career as a parking adjudicator in London (a rare judicial appointment which only requires 3 years post qualification experience) and, for a while, also acted as a Legal Assessor to disciplinary panels of the Nursing & Midwifery Council.

2. Why did you choose to join the judiciary?

I started my career advising on how to make decisions, spent most of my career persuading courts to adopt the decision I sought and realised that the time had come where I would actually like the challenge of making the decisions. I chose a career in criminal law because of a real passion to fight injustice. And what better place to fight it than from within the judiciary? I also thought I could make a small, but real, difference to people's lives. In that sense I saw the judiciary as the next logical step from being an advocate.

3. What skills did you bring to the judiciary as a solicitor and what skills do you think you have developed/improved as a result of being a judge?

I bring my individual mix of second generation immigrant, working class values from the streets of Slough to a judiciary that is working hard to broaden its base of experience. I hope I also bring the common sense, logical thinking and plain talking of practice and experiences of my own neighbourhood to the difficult task of administering justice in a diverse and increasingly, polarised society.

Since taking up position, I have had to carefully think again about my own prejudices and stereotypes, and open my mind to environments of which I have had little experience. But, most challenging has been reflecting, again, my own role in striving to ensure that justice is done in a system, which I sometimes feel undermines justice itself....

4. What qualities do you think are important for judges today?

A strong sense of wanting justice to be done, independence, a large dose of common sense and an understanding of the realities of the 'real world' around us, are, I believe the foundation to a judicial career. The Magistrates' Court is where the general public are most likely to come into contact with the criminal courts and society demands an understanding of 'us' rather than the perception of trial by 'them', the detached legal classes. Perceptions are important, and the judiciary must reflect society and show they are in tune with the public, yet, remain objective to ensure that justice is done without favour.... Knowing your law also helps!

5. What barriers still remain to solicitors entering the judiciary and what should be done to tackle those barriers?

Like the experience of many colleagues, a part-time judicial career proved difficult to juggle with the demands of partnership in a large and busy practice. Part-time office is generally a pre-requisite to a full time position, and can suggest a conflict of commitment, especially at a time when law firms struggle. Aspiring judges need to have an honest discussion with their partners about the added value to the practice of having a part-time judge and counter any suggestions that the position is necessarily an early exit strategy.

Whatever background we come from, we have to believe that 'they' genuinely want people like 'us' on the Bench. Too many still believe that 'I' do not stand a chance because of background or career path. This resistance is being overcome slowly, but will only genuinely be overcome when the judiciary truly starts to reflect diversity, whether it be more solicitor, women or ethnic minority appointments.

That said, there must be no illusion; only the best candidates who best fit the criteria for appointment will be selected. Competition is truly fierce.

6. What would be your three 'top tips' for a solicitor thinking about joining the judiciary?

Plan early. Ensure you understand what the JAC will seek you to establish by ways of skills and experience and have a portfolio ready to demonstrate that you hit the mark.

Prepare thoroughly for the intensely competitive selection process that you will enter into. This would include understanding the demands of the Qualifying Test and preparing accordingly.

Think widely in terms of your first step on the judicial ladder. Tribunal appointments are as challenging and in every aspect, just as rewarding as the courts judiciary. Your skills are transferable so keep a keen eye on the legal press as regards positions that you might not have initially considered, including those outside the formal judiciary. After all, what did I know about doctors and nurses?