

Lord Chancellor Swearing-in Ceremony: Lord Chancellor's speech

May I first thank the Lord Chief Justice for his warm welcome. And your assiduously researched speech.

I would also like to welcome back the Attorney General to her post following her maternity leave – I hope your gorgeous daughter is allowing her Mum at least some sleep.

The country owes you Lord Chief and the entire judiciary a debt of gratitude, For keeping the wheels of the justice system rolling throughout this awful pandemic.

I look forward to working with you and the other members of the Bench here today – as well as judges up and down the country as we come out of the pandemic and return to something akin to normal.

And as a solicitor, I look forward to working with and supporting our brilliant legal professions, our solicitors and barristers, as we tackle the challenges we face together.

With that in mind, I'm also delighted to welcome my friend and highly esteemed colleague, Alex Chalk, to his new role as Solicitor General.

As a Law Officer, he holds a historic and very important role in our democracy – ensuring governments act lawfully and overseeing the vital work of our prosecuting authorities.

In truth, I am sorry to lose him from the Ministry of Justice but buoyed to know that he will bring all his usual energy, diligence and pizzazz to his new role.

May I also take a moment to thank my predecessor, Robert Buckland, for his deep commitment to supporting the judiciary and the rule of law.

I swore I wouldn't mention Brexit at this Oath. So please forgive me Lord Chief, but my abiding memory of working with Robert – in the aftermath of the EU referendum with all of its polarisation – where, because we were friends, we, how shall I say it, managed to view the brief from different vantage points without falling out. But we worked together in a harmonious and, dare I say it, rather jolly way, through a rather bad-tempered period of British politics, including on the legal and judicial aspects of the Withdrawal Agreement Bill, we were both on the Bill team, during its passage through Parliament.

While I reflected on this, it reminded me at the time of the words of the great John Stuart Mill, "He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that."

Of course, that is a central tenet to the common law view of justice. A fundamental, if sometimes overlooked, secret to its success. Both on principle and on the outcomes it delivers.

I have also always felt that is a quintessentially British disposition, and it wouldn't hurt to have a bit more of it in our public discourse, including today as we bounce back from this appalling pandemic, which at least has served to galvanise some national sense of unity of spirit.

In any case, from the unique position of this office which I am now truly honoured to hold, I sense that Mill's maxim will be quite an important lodestar on the road ahead.

In preparation for my swearing in as the Lord Chief was engaged himself, my wonderful officials did their ritual due diligence to see if there was anything particularly unique in my appointment.

Despite their best efforts, there wasn't much. The best they could valiantly come up with was to point out that that I am the first Lord Chancellor to hold a black belt third Dan in Karate, and suggest that this was a perhaps sign of how tenaciously I would defend the rule of law.

I do hope it won't come to that, not least because I had a hip replacement a just few years ago.

But what I can say is that I take the Oath that I have sworn very seriously indeed.

And I will be unflinching in upholding the long-held principles of the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary.

As we all know, this is not just a matter of pure legal form, but a pledge to safeguard the fairness and freedoms which in our society are safeguarded under the umbrella of the rule of law and access to justice.

For your part, you, the judiciary, bring huge knowledge, a wealth of experience and a range of erudite expertise to the judgments that you make.

I know that these can often be challenging and hugely complex cases.

And I want to thank you for all the dedication, the diligence and the personal care and sensitivity with which you all approach those decisions.

There are many finer legal minds in the room today than mine. But I hope that I can offer at least some range of perspective.

I started my training as a solicitor on secondment at Liberty, I spent time visiting many young men in prison, who seemed to have tripped up into their fate, rather being particularly malevolent.

I believe in firm and robust criminal justice, but I also believe in providing the springboard of opportunities to divert young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds away from gangs, drugs and violence that

plague not just their own lives, but their communities.

I spent many years as a volunteer and then Trustee at Fight for Peace, a martial arts and boxing charity in Newham seeing how this can be achieved, transforming the life chances of those young people, to the enormous benefit of their communities.

Later, I served for six years as a Foreign Office legal adviser at the time of the acute tensions surrounding the second Iraq War.

I am not seeking to rake over old coals, but I did want to explain how an abiding and passionate commitment to the rule of law has been forged in my head and my heart, throughout my career.

Above all, as we pursue reform to improve the conditions of our society, whether that be credible community sentences or improving the family law system, I've learnt the overwhelming need for perseverance.

In 2004, when I was posted to the Hague as a young war crimes lawyer, I had the opportunity to negotiate the UK-UN sentence enforcement agreement for the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

I remember at the time, we were all wondering with colleagues if we'd ever see justice for those responsible for the worst war crimes Europe had seen since the Holocaust. In fact, I wondered if we'd arrest anyone at all

It seemed a rather forlorn hope amidst the ashes of Yugoslavia at that time. But British fashion we kept plugging away.

We signed the agreement, and I'm proud to say that 17 years on, this year, Radovan Karadžić is serving his prison sentence in a British jail for the crime of genocide – one of the few sentences for genocide ever given – a sign of Global Britain as an even stronger force for good in the world.

As the son of a refugee who fled the Holocaust, this is something that I, and I believe we as a country, should take great pride in.

I do hope however you'll forgive me if I am restless to deliver a little more swiftly when it comes to Her Majesty's government's domestic agenda, here at home.

Because, we have a lot to be getting on with. I am determined to carry on the great work that's underway.

To increase court capacity, because as we bounce back from the pandemic we need to harness and lock in the digital lessons we've all learned during COVID.

To see through our prison building programme, because incarceration protects the public from the most serious and dangerous offenders, and that is one of my overriding priorities alongside upholding the independence of the judiciary.

To create a prison system that properly rehabilitates prisoners, because reducing re-offending is the most sustainable way to cut crime. And we know, one of the differences between one of my previous duties at the Ministry of Justice, we have the empirical basis, to support offenders through training, alcohol and drug rehabilitation, strengthening family bonds, job opportunities and ensuring a roof over the heads of those discharged from prison.

I want to deliver a step-change too in the support, and coordination of support for victims too, because I believe we have an overriding duty of care to the most vulnerable in society.

Throughout, I will use my time in this position to continue safeguarding judicial independence – supporting a clear separation of powers between the three branches of government.

Our justice system has been tested over the past 18 months. But it has continued to operate throughout the pandemic and I'm very proud that we were the first jurisdiction anywhere to resume in-person jury trials, an important symbol and to the world.

Having all been cooped up for so long, I confess I am restless – determined to build on the rapid innovations that the courts have overseen to help us tackle the impact of coronavirus – not least the rapid roll out of remote technology across the estate to beam people into courtrooms – something that was lucky enough to work on in 2017 as courts minister, a just a policy proposal .

This is a real testament to the judges, court staff and those in the legal sector who worked tirelessly to ensure that, while everything else appeared to be grinding to a halt, victims were supported, and criminals were brought to justice.

Of course, all of those cases cannot progress without the dedication of our lawyers and judges, and I want to take this opportunity to personally thank all those who worked and continue to work so hard to see that justice is done. You truly went the extra mile, and your commitment and dedication is enormously appreciated by me and the public at large.

The evolution and endurance of this great office of state gives a truly privileged insight into the principles upon which our justice system hinges, and our society as a whole depends.

The foundations of those principles remain strong, and the roots run deep.

But, if we can also reform, if we adapt, and if we can realise the enormous potential on display across our professions, I have no doubt that we can go from strength to strength, and write an even brighter chapter for the next generation, inspired by their idealism and the ideas of their age.

So, I will strive to maintain the unrivalled international reputation for excellence that we have on these shores. I will strive to defend our legal services, our judiciary and our justice system at large.

And here at home, I want our citizens to feel a renewed confidence in their every-day experience British justice, as a system that is fair, open and accessible, one that protects victims, makes our streets safer and serves the public, in a way that is both true to our values, but also equipped for the challenges that lie ahead.

Thank you.