

Speech: CILEx Commencement Speech 2017

I am absolutely delighted to be here today to welcome you all to the legal profession, and to congratulate you on this wonderful achievement.

I have no doubt that every single one of you in this room today has worked incredibly hard to get to this point, and it is my great privilege to share this moment with you.

In fact, I know this only too well through my own experience as a lecturer for CILEx. When I was lecturing my class was entirely of students who were juggling working and childcare responsibilities.

While you have all achieved something notable just by being here today, I want to encourage you to think of this as just the beginning. As CILEx lawyers, you now have more opportunities open to you than ever before.

Many of you will go on to have successful careers in private legal practice – indeed hundreds of CILEx members who have sat where you are now have worked their way on to become partners at solicitor firms.

Many of you will seek independent practice rights, and set up your own firms. Others will take the public sector route, working as government legal advisors, for local authorities, or as CPS prosecutors.

But there is another potential goal that I would like you to hold in your minds, and that is to enter the ranks of the judiciary.

While this may seem like a distant prospect right now (indeed you must be at least 5 years post qualified), it is an ambition that I hope at least some of you will choose to eventually pursue.

We are fortunate in this country to be served by one of the world's finest judiciaries, but we have still yet to truly unlock the full pool of talent available to perform this most critical public function.

The great personal drive, and diversity of membership and perspective of CILEx members makes you ideally suited to serve in our courts and tribunals. And we must ensure that you are given the opportunity to do so.

As an organisation, I know CILEx is committed to supporting members who wish to pursue careers in the judiciary, and I would urge all of you to at least consider the prospect.

Of course, a career in the judiciary is just one of the many positive ways in which you, as graduates and lawyers, can give back and contribute to the community.

The Attorney General and I are passionate advocates for pro bono legal support, and for the provision of public legal education.

Chartered Legal Executives like you possess skills and experience which you can use to make a great deal of difference in people's lives. You will do this every day in your paid employment, but I want to encourage you to consider the options available to also donate some of your time to those most in need.

This can take many forms – it can be on ad hoc basis, or come through more structured volunteering, such as at your local Citizens Advice Bureau. The CILEx Pro Bono Trust also offers opportunities for you to get involved in. We have seen recently – in the wake of the terrible tragedies this country has faced – just how powerful a force pro bono can be.

The legal community has rallied admirably to support the victims and families of the London and Manchester terrorist attacks, and the Grenfell fire. Through a great collective pro bono effort, these people have had access to advice, support and advocacy in their hour of greatest need.

Some of you may be thinking 'but I work in conveyancing, or debt recovery, that's not my area of specialism' – but you are legally trained: legal research, client care, document analysis, processes, procedures, policies – these are skills that you are qualified in – and no matter your area of law there are those who you can help.

But emergency pro bono support is not the only contribution you can make. Through the provision of Public Legal Education, lawyers like you play an invaluable role in providing people with awareness, knowledge and understanding of their rights and the rights of other citizens. This builds the confidence and skills they need to deal with disputes and helps ensure access to justice.

Public Legal Education helps people recognise when they may need support, what sort of advice is available, and how to go about getting it.

It is a field I have been involved in since entering private practise in the 1990s. At the bar I worked for the Speakers In Schools scheme and in organising the Welsh heats of the Bar Mock Trials competition.

There are many ways to teach people about the law, from interactive presentations, mock trials and role play exercises to awareness raising campaigns or information in leaflets and online. Different organisations tailor this to different groups, from educating primary and secondary school pupils to prison inmates, community groups and homeless people.

I am very pleased to have the strong support of CILEx in the Public Legal Education Panel that I recently established. This Panel seeks to coordinate and enhance the provision of Public Legal Education in England and Wales, and complements the good work already undertaken by the Attorney General's pro bono committee.

CILEx Graduates and Chartered Legal Executives like you already make a fantastic contribution to public legal education, but I know collectively we can do even more to education and empower our community.

I want to conclude by wishing all of you the very best in your career ahead.

Law is a hugely challenging profession, but also an immensely rewarding one.

As you celebrate your wonderful achievement with your friends and family today, I encourage you to look forward to the future with optimism, to take risks, and to push yourself to achieve even more than you ever imagined you could.