

Launch of the UK Association of Black Judges

Welcome Speech by Judge Cordella Bart-Stewart (OBE)

Good evening, distinguished guests, colleagues, and friends. Thank you, Lord Leggatt, for those warm words.

For those that do not know me, I am a solicitor, admitted to the Roll in 1987. 3 years later, I set up my own high street practice in North London. I have also been a fee-paid immigration and asylum judge for 25 years. I am speaking this evening not just in a personal capacity but on behalf of the wonderful steering committee, whom I hope you engage with after the formal part of these proceedings, feed your thoughts on how the organisation can best meet its aims and help you.

If you don't mind, I would like us to start with a minute's silence for the late Courtenay Griffiths K,C, who sadly passed away last week. Courtenay was one of the first Black silks and a great friend, mentor and inspiration to many of us in this room. He passed away after a long bout of debilitating illness. He was a pioneer and would have been pleased to be with us this evening.....

First, I must offer a sincere thank you to the Lady Chief Justice for her support and for taking the time to be with us this evening. Your presence and encouragement send a powerful message to the entire legal community that the importance of representation and inclusion is recognised at the highest level of the judiciary. We are grateful for your leadership and for your commitment to building a profession that truly reflects the society it serves.

I would also like to extend a very special thank you to Lady Justice Whipple. It was at the Association of Women Judges conference in November that my colleagues and I shared our experiences, perhaps with a touch of weariness at how often these conversations must be repeated.

Lady Justice Whipple agreed to meet with me and the judges who now form the steering group. That meeting was in January, and thanks to active encouragement, we launched this Association. It reminds us that for things to change, allyship must be substantial and with purpose, and we hope that continues.

I also want to thank Vicky Fox, CEO of the Supreme Court, for agreeing to host the launch. She and the judges who sit here are also committed to inclusion and fairness, and we appreciate that we have a number of our Supreme Court judges with us this evening.

So,...It is with immense pride and gratitude that we thank everyone here and online for joining us in this momentous occasion: the launch of the UK Association of Black Judges. I was surprised at the number of people who said that the association was long overdue. At the same time, it is disappointing that in 2025, such an organisation is considered necessary.

I see it as the continuation of a journey paved by those who came before us, often unseen and unheard, but always with purpose. It is a journey of perseverance, of service, and of breaking barriers with dignity that many of us in this room know well.

The reason that we have come together to form the UK Association of Black Judges is simple. Representation matters.

The Black working-age population is 4.4%, a figure that is much higher here in London and other major cities and conurbations where we have long been settled. Most of us know that Black judges make up just 1% of the judiciary in the United Kingdom. Only 1.3% of court judges are recorded as of Black ethnicity, and 1.7% of tribunal judges. But 3% of non-legal Tribunal members are Black. We have to ask why? Are there different expectations of us and assumptions about us?

Many people resent filling in diversity monitoring forms; however, gathering data is vital. What it reveals holds up a mirror to our systems and society, both of which we are all deeply committed to; otherwise, we would not be doing the work we do. But it is a system that must, if it is to command the confidence of the society it serves, reflect the full breadth and richness of that society.

A few months before he stepped down, I happened on the then Justice Minister, Jack Straw MP. I raised with him the inaction with regard to diversity in the judiciary, and he promised to act. Soon after, he set up the Advisory Panel on Judicial Appointments, which was chaired by Baroness Neuberger. I was the first lawyer she asked to speak with. On my way to meet her in the tea room of the House of Lords, I rightly guessed that the question she would ask was what I thought the problem was. My answer then, and I still believe, is that it is race and class. In their 2010 interim report, the panel said, “failure to appoint well-qualified candidates from diverse backgrounds to judicial office represents exclusion from participation in power”. A visibly diverse judiciary is a tangible expression of inclusion and vital to a stable, cohesive society.

This organisation has been created as something rooted in responsibility, resolve and a belief that we need to work together to effect change and progress. We are here to be a collective voice, to support, and to show that we take seriously the task of paving the way for those who will follow.

We know that talent is not limited by background and potential is not reserved for the few. Like many in the room, I was told that I could not be a lawyer; sometimes, I was told this was because I was female. But when I was at secondary school, my mother was an evening cleaner at the Birmingham City Council Solicitors' Office. Sometimes I would meet her there after work. There was always this one white woman working alone late at night. She was a conveyancer and explained to me what she did. She always asked after me, and it was she who signed my reference for law school. Because of her, I knew that women could be Solicitors.

While access to the profession has generally improved for gender and other ethnicities, it has been resolutely stubborn when it comes to Black Judges. We know the reality: that the path to the bench has not been and is not equally accessible to all, but navigating that path as a Black professional often means carrying an additional burden—of being first, of being

only, of being expected to represent more than just yourself. And even when we get there, we often have to justify our existence, sometimes even to access the very buildings where we are supposed to administer justice and fair treatment to all who come before us! It is both tiring and tiresome.

We overhear colleagues muttering that we have filled some quota, despite data showing that we remain woefully underrepresented. I can't pretend that it is not frustrating to keep reading Ministry of Justice data that tells me that I am of a demographic that is the least likely person to be appointed to the judiciary, a Black, female Solicitor. Why? For 25 years, I have been able to combine that role with running a practice. Leadership, case management skills and being able to communicate with litigants in person and the public at large, as well as a good knowledge of law and practice, are essential to both roles. Nevertheless, as I read recently on that great oracle, LinkedIn, we have to "keep excelling, forcing uncomfortable conversations through undeniable talent. Because that's what we do, turn our obstacles into our stepping stones, ceilings into our floors".

This Association exists to offer connection, mentorship, and advocacy. To be a space where Black judges can speak freely, support each other meaningfully, including the ability to share experiences that are personal and collective, and work in step as we continue to uphold the principles of fairness, justice and equality in courtrooms every day. We want to create spaces where we do not just survive but can also thrive.

I hope you see from the people around you this evening that the Association is not about division but to strengthen the profession by making it more representative and transparent. That the young aspiring lawyers, students, and schoolchildren who will look at the bench and ask: Is there a place for me there? Can see that answer is: Yes.

It is important to say that this is not a closed circle. We would have loved to invite many more people. We welcome the support and shared purpose of our allies and appreciate you making the time to join us this evening. But it needs more than that.

Progress in any profession, especially one as foundational as the judiciary, cannot rest on the shoulders of a few. It requires collective will. It requires those who are not directly affected to also recognise their role in removing barriers and widening the path.

Allyship, in essence, should mean friendship, standing beside, speaking up, and at times, stepping back so that others may be seen and heard. But it is also about asking difficult questions and being open to honest answers. Just as you would with any other friend.

We know that many of our colleagues, mentors, and leaders have long championed inclusion out of principle. We invite continued partnership, because meaningful change does not happen in isolation. The Association stands for fairness and progress in our justice system, something in which we all have a stake.

And to the Black lawyers in the room or online who are not Judges – can I say, please do stretch toward the bench. It is not easy, but it is necessary. We know the hurdles and the doubts—some of which are ours, and some of which have been projected onto us. But you belong at every level of this profession, including the judiciary, and we should be part of it, shaping it, informing it with the breadth of our experience and values.

Take inspiration from the group of people you see around you. This association is here to support you. No one arrives feeling entirely ready or a fully formed judge. We grow into the roles we step into, something I think the Judicial Appointments Commission need to seriously look into in their assessment processes.

We will look at developing or working with others on initiatives such as Mentoring Programmes, Judicial Application Workshops, Outreach Events, and, importantly, visibility campaigns and events to ensure that future candidates see themselves represented and feel empowered to follow.

With retirements, that 1% is in danger of going backwards. We say respectfully to the Judicial Appointments Commission that more must be done. Many highly qualified Black applicants are being turned away and permanently put off. It requires more than trying to fix the candidate.

We recognise the efforts that have been made, the outreach and the stated aims of inclusion, but the lack of meaningful outcomes tells us there is a persistent gap between intention and impact. We need to go beyond numbers and reach into the structures that continue to produce the same results year after year. No other demographic faces this challenge. It is not right. It is not fair. We must examine not only the criteria, but the culture around them. Representation is not about ticking a box. It is about legitimacy. It is about public trust. Justice being seen—not only to be done—but to be done by a judiciary that reflects the diversity, talent, and lived realities of the society it serves.

We do not raise these concerns as critics from the outside, but as dedicated members of the judiciary who care deeply about its future. We stand ready to collaborate. But we also stand firm in our belief that change is not only possible—it is long overdue.

Before I end, I must pause to recognise six exceptional women without whom tonight would not be possible. Margo Boye, Carole Burgher, Leona Harrison, Jacqueline Devonish, Therese Kamara, and Ifey Munonyedi readily joined me at the meeting with Lady Justice Whipple 6 months ago. Their commitment, energy, and unwavering support, long before that meeting actually took place, have brought this Association from conversation to reality. Thank you for every late meeting, every email, every idea, and every moment of your time that you gave freely—not for recognition, but because you believed in the purpose of this work. You showed up again and again, with your wisdom, your humour, and your deep sense of care. This launch is a reflection of your collective strength.

I came to England as a four-year-old to join my parents. My father was working in a factory. My mother did informal child minding in our home and office cleaning, mornings and evenings. No one in our community expected or encouraged me to be a lawyer. It was considered totally out of reach. The young Cordella would never have imagined this evening, speaking in this venue.

This moment is not just for us. It is for the young law student wondering if there's a future for them in the highest courts. It is for the communities that deserve to see justice done and to see themselves reflected in those who deliver it at every level.

Many of you who responded have said that this is long overdue. We hope this is a foundation of change for those who will come after, and I hope you will all be proud to be part of it and contribute to its success.

Thank you.