

Baroness Scotland tells *Anne Giacomantonio* things have changed radically since she came to the Bar, but challenges remain

Raising the bar for everyone

Baroness Scotland was appointed Attorney General in the Prime Minister Gordon Brown's Government in 2007. At the time, her appointment was seen as a huge step forward for diversity. Baroness Scotland, as the first female and ethnic minority person to hold the post, is now, as she was in her previous role as QC, seen as an inspirational role model – a title she has not always courted but which she has come to accept as a rewarding part of her role as the Government's top legal adviser. It's important, she says, to recognise that responsibility goes hand in hand with being an inspiration, but it's also a challenge she accepts as a good citizen.

Baroness Scotland, 54, ticks more than one box on the diversity spectrum but is keen to point out that it doesn't mean she practises law any differently. "When I came to the Bar, it was far more challenging for women – women were very much seen as a minority and that has changed so radically in the last 30-plus years."

University intakes have become more or less gender-equal; the balance is changing and Baroness Scotland looks forward to a time when there will be real equality.

She says in the early years of her career, very little was expected from people from black minority backgrounds, and from women. "It was almost as if I was a surprise, and you became more memorable. I remember being told once: 'Oh my god, you speak English so beautifully!', and this was a sort of shock. I think that shows how much things have changed."

Today there is a second generation of those whose parents migrated to the UK, who are fundamentally British, which has changed the idea of British identity. Baroness Scotland thinks people now



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understand Britons come in all shapes and sizes and that this reality is reflected in industries throughout the UK. But she says there are still a few challenges to work on. "I hope we will come to a time when we won't be talking about someone's gender or someone's race – we'll just be talking about how fabulous they are."

She sees encouragement as a crucial part of developing a diverse workforce for the future and admits that her most important careers advisers came from within her own family. "My family gave me incredible support, but I worry about those families that don't have that resilience, that support or vision," she says.

Baroness Scotland came from a family who told her there was no such word as "can't". It was a phrase she found very annoying at the time, but which she now recognises was the catalyst that gave her the confidence to succeed. "They said: 'You can, because we have – and now you will.'"

She also recognises that educational institutions that offer careers advice have improved immeasurably from the time she was advised that a supervisor role at her local supermarket would be a good choice of career. "If you just look at the gender issue, no one bats an eyelid now about women doing any form of law at all," she says. Things have moved on from an era when women were found only in family law, an area Baroness Scotland specialised in, to a time when women have their pick of specialisation, from commercial to intellectual property (IP) law.

"It's so easy to crush a young person – most of us don't think we are fit to do anything," she says. Today's young professionals need to recognise they have a responsibility to make a contribution to improving conditions for the next generation in all industries, not just law, she says. "We're doing it, but you have to take up the challenge," is how she puts it.

On being recognised as a role model, Baroness Scotland says: "You have to accept it – whether you want to be or not, you are." Encouragingly, she continues: "It's... understanding that every single one of us has a role, and that we love our profession and that if we want more people to come forward to make our justice system the high-quality service that we all want, then you have to play your part."

A real way of motivating younger people, she suggests, is by going back to your old school and saying: "I went here. I was like you, and look at me now."



Baroness Scotland thinks a large part of the population today struggles to understand the idea of good citizenship and its relationship with the law. "I think most people think that the law has nothing to do with me. There isn't a real appreciation of the power that each of us has as an individual citizen to make a difference."

But she says it was a power that people had a chance to appreciate during the election of President Obama in the US earlier this year. "People who hitherto thought 'I'm not corporate, I'm not big news, I don't count', they saw their votes, one by one by one, change the face of history."

But empowerment does not come just from elections. It can come from understanding that the law affects people in every avenue of their lives. Music, science, technology and environment issues all involve aspects of the law including copyright, contract, international framework and IP. To this end, the Attorney General is

launching a Youth Network initiative to engage with young people about their relationship with the law.

"The whole point of the network is to help people to better understand the way in which our society is structured. Why the rule of law is so fundamentally important to our democracy, and how they, as a citizen, can get better engaged and better respond to the challenge that we are being made now for good governance."

She says that even if one does not aspire to be a lawyer, it's important to understand the law and have it work for you and your community. For those who do see their career in the profession, Baroness Scotland warns that you must have a sincere passion to sustain a career.

She says it is not an industry to go into to make money alone. "Although you might make a lot of money, there has to be a thirst for justice." You must want to change things, she believes; you must want

to facilitate people being dealt with fairly, and you must have a passion for justice.

It's this passion, she says, that is a common thread with lawyers from every generation. "It's a great profession, but it's not an easy profession, and it's not for the faint-hearted. It's for those who are courageous and for those who will work hard," she insists.

Reflecting back to her inspirational upbringing, she says: "I was always taught to believe your talent is not just for you, it's there to enable you to make a difference to the world in which you live. Find it, hone it and use it to benefit others."

And on an upbeat note, she says if you think that you have that talent then "go for it, because you might end up Attorney General".

For more information about the Attorney General's Youth Net programme, visit www.youtube.com/agyouthnet