

'A Living National Treasure'

Speech Given at the Bench and Bar Dinner on 17 June 1994¹

Sir Maurice Byers

It's disconcerting to realise that you've been a barrister longer than many of your colleagues have been alive. Longer than Jacqui Gleeson, for example, who has said so many kind things about me. And longer, no doubt, than many others. Not longer than Theo, of course, who has also been kind to me.

But tonight we're together as barristers and as former barristers. We are all ministers of justice, sharing the one responsibility; each bound by the one duty owed to justice and having like immunities because of that. So in what we do we are equal colleagues in the one undertaking, whatever our function and whatever our age and whatever our experience.

I would like tonight to say something about the profession to which we all belong and how it has changed during the years I've been a member of it.

In 1944 the Supreme Court of New South Wales consisted of the Chief Justice, 10 puisne judges and, for part of that year, an acting judge. It then exercised jurisdiction in Admiralty, Bankruptcy, Divorce, Equity and Probate. It is comprised now of the Chief Justice, the President of the Court of Appeal, seven Judges of Appeal, a Chief Judge in Equity, another at Common Law and a third of the Commercial Division plus 30 other judges.

In 1944 the District Court was much smaller than its present Chief Judge and 57 District Court judges. There are 34 Federal Court and 52 Family Court judges. Of course, these two courts have an Australia-wide jurisdiction, but nonetheless, a considerable number of federal judges are concerned with litigation originating in this State and between New South Wales residents.

I have mentioned these numbers not to suggest that there are now too many judges or courts, but to illustrate that the legal system has become much more extensive, complicated and sophisticated than would have been expected or even considered possible 50 years ago. And I have mentioned neither the Industrial

¹ T Simos QC, J Gleeson and Sir Maurice Byers QBE QC, 'A "Living National Treasure" – Sir Maurice Byers CBE, QC: Speeches given at the Bench and Bar Dinner on 17 June 1994' [1994] *Bar News* (Spring/Summer) 17.

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