

# The Hon Justice Peter Johnson



Peter Johnson SC was sworn in as a judge of the Supreme Court of New South Wales on Tuesday, 1 February 2005. The Hon RJ Debus MP addressed the court on behalf of the Bar.

The attorney detailed his Honour's long and assiduous apprenticeship in the law. After completing a Bachelor of Arts in 1972 at Sydney University he went on to receive a Bachelor of Laws in 1975 and

a Master of Laws in 1981. In 1976 his Honour was admitted as a solicitor and worked in the then Public Solicitor's Office. During this time, his Honour was also the duty solicitor in courts of petty sessions, the solicitor in charge at Hurstville Legal Aid Office, and solicitor in charge in the Research and Advising Section. Admitted as a barrister in February 1982 His Honour read with Colin O'Connor, now his Honour Judge O'Connor QC of the District Court.

Whilst later refusing to shake the infamous Chopper Reid's hand - a slight he took poorly and referred to in his book, getting down and dirty with the criminal element is nothing new to his Honour. Indeed, his Honour's first year as a lawyer working in the Public Solicitor's Office - the precursor of the Legal Aid Commission of NSW - was spent as the duty solicitor at a variety of local courts. Finding himself accidentally incarcerated on the wrong side of the cell door during an interview with a client, while an inauspicious start to a career, such an event certainly failed to blight it. In fact, his Honour quickly moved on to run the Hurstville Legal Aid Office where one of his colleagues was a fellow called Rod Howie. He has now, of course, taken on the appellation of the Hon Justice Howie.

His Honour has specialised in the areas of administrative, criminal and appellate law and appeared before numerous inquiries, recently appearing as senior counsel at both the Special Commission of Inquiry into the Waterfall Rail Accident and for the Australian Capital Territory at the inquest and inquiry arising from the ACT fires of January 2003. His Honour has also appeared before the High Court on several occasions.

Appearing with Glen Bartley as junior counsel, his Honour appeared in the *Queen v Young*, a case concerning sexual assault communications privilege and although his Honour did not win the matter, it is a tribute to his legal expertise and skill that the parliament later introduced amending legislation which implemented his arguments.

When it comes to the printed word, his Honour is described as being a bower bird, putting things away in case they may be needed at a future date, and accumulating an eclectic collection - submissions, articles, transcripts, obscure documents, duplicates - all kept for future reference. His Honour's move to the Bench has been described by colleagues as 'the greatest cull in the history of chambers'.

At his Honour's swearing in ceremony, John McIntyre, President of the Law Society of New South Wales, addressed the court in the following way:

The famous philosopher and lawyer, Cicero, once said, 'A room without books is like a body without a soul.'

The sentiment of this quote is something that your Honour has taken to heart. It has been put to me that the written word is your life. I am told that you cannot pass a book store without purchasing volumes.

His Honour's written advices have been described as 'works of art'. Apparently, judges frequently ask for written submissions which, with the benefit of good cut and paste, seem to make an appearance in the final judgment. Justice Whitlam recently described one of his Honour's submissions as 'a model of clarity'.

His Honour's excellent legal knowledge, not only about the relevant areas of law, but also about practice and procedures has ensured that he is highly respected by present and former colleagues and the judiciary. An example of that high regard is evidenced in the words of Chester Porter QC, who, upon hearing of his Honour's appointment, wrote:

You will be a modest judge, although you have much less to be modest about than most. You have a sense of justice which, combined with your learning, will ensure that people receive a fair trial.