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JUSTICES OF THE HIGH COURT OF AUSTRALIA

DURING THE CURRENCY OF THIS VOLUME

THE HONOURABLE SIR ANTHONY FRANK MASON, AC, KBE
CHIEF JUSTICE (retired 20 April 1995)

THE HONOURABLE SIR FRANCIS GERARD BRENNAN, AC, KBE
CHIEF JUSTICE (appointed 21 April 1995)

THE HONOURABLE SIR WILLIAM PATRICK DEANE, AC, KBE

THE HONOURABLE SIR DARYL MICHAEL DAWSON, AC, KBE,
CB

THE HONOURABLE JOHN LESLIE TOOHEY, AC

THE HONOURABLE MARY GENEVIEVE GAUDRON

THE HONOURABLE MICHAEL HUDSON MCHUGH, AC

THE HONOURABLE WILLIAM MONTAGUE CHARLES GUMMOW
(appointed 21 April 1995)

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

THE HONOURABLE MICHAEL HUGH LAVARCH, MP

MEMORANDA

- 1995
- April 20 — Retirement of THE HONOURABLE SIR ANTHONY FRANK MASON, AC, KBE, from the office of Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia.
- April 21 — Appointment of THE HONOURABLE SIR FRANCIS GERARD BRENNAN, AC, KBE, to the office of Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia.
- Appointment of THE HONOURABLE WILLIAM MONTAGUE CHARLES GUMMOW, a Judge of the Federal Court of Australia, to the office of a Justice of the High Court of Australia.

RETIREMENT OF CHIEF JUSTICE SIR ANTHONY MASON

On Thursday, 20 April 1995, to mark the retirement of the Honourable SIR ANTHONY MASON AC, KBE, from the office of Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia, farewell addresses were delivered before the High Court at Canberra by the Honourable M H LAVARCH MP, Attorney-General for the Commonwealth, Mr N S FOWLER, President of the Law Council of Australia, Mrs S M CRENNAN QC, President of the Australian Bar Association, and Mr M H TOBIAS QC, President of the New South Wales Bar Association.

In his reply, Sir ANTHONY MASON said: —

Mr Attorney, Mr Fowler, Mrs Crennan and Mr Tobias, I thank you all for your more than generous remarks. Fortunately, there is no contradictor and, on this occasion, no one will convict me of neglect if I fail to subject what you have said to critical judicial scrutiny.

In addition to my former colleagues, Sir Harry Gibbs and Sir Ronald Wilson, I am pleased that we have with us today the Australian Chief Justices and the Chief Justice of New Zealand, Sir Thomas Eichelbaum. Sir Thomas has been attending a meeting of the Council of Australian Chief Justices here in Canberra. Although he attends our meetings in the capacity of an observer, that description does not do justice to his contribution to our discussions. The Council provides a valuable forum for the exchange between Chief Justices of information and ideas and enables each of us to reach better informed conclusions on a broad range of issues. Sir Thomas' contribution to the Council and his presence today signify the close ties which exist between the judiciary in Australia and New Zealand.

As you have heard, I have been a member of this Court for almost twenty-three years and that amounts to half my working life. It has been a great experience. Indeed I cannot imagine anything else that would have given me as much satisfaction. From my very early days, it was my ambition to become a barrister and at no stage did it ever occur to me that I might take up any other career. Curiously enough, one of the attractions of the law, as I saw it in my younger days, was that it offered all the certainty of mathematics as a discipline, a view from which I was later forced to retreat when, as a law student, I began to study Constitutional Law and I became acquainted with the old learning on s 92 of the Constitution.

Later, as a barrister and then as Solicitor-General, I appeared not infrequently before this Court. As a judge of the New South Wales Court of Appeal, I had the purifying experience of being reversed on appeal by the High Court on a number of occasions. So, even in the two decades before 1972, the decisions of this Court had become the focal point of my working life.

Like other members of the Court, past and present, I have been very conscious of the responsibilities entrusted to the Court by the Constitution. Those responsibilities are perhaps more widely appreciated now than they were even a decade ago. If so, that is a very good thing because we need to enhance better understanding of our Constitution and how it works. But I doubt that the

role of the Court is more widely publicised or better understood now than it was in the first quarter of this century, when the Court's decisions, particularly in the early years after Federation, dealt for the first time with many of the critical questions arising under the Constitution. Those decisions had a significant impact on the structure of government in this country and reflected the new-found sense of national identity.

Today, one difference is that the courts, especially the High Court, are required to decide a wider variety of legal issues of public importance. Decisions on these issues naturally and inevitably excite public discussion. The very existence of that discussion emphasises the importance to the community of the judicial function and the vital part which it plays in the life of the community.

Of course, it is neither practical nor possible for the judges to become continuing participants in the public discussion of the merits of particular decisions. The judges' reasons for their decisions are expressed comprehensively in their judgments. So it is on the quality and cogency of those reasons that the acceptance of the decisions and, ultimately, public confidence in the judiciary depends.

In the case of questions which are difficult and controversial, it is not possible to expect that the answers given will attract universal acceptance. But the community is entitled to expect judgments will be principled, reasoned and objective — characteristics that distinguish the judicial function from the political process — and that the courts will strive to conform to that standard.

And the community has the protection and the satisfaction of knowing that judicial decisions are given by independent judges, for our Constitution incorporates that fundamental principle of democratic Constitution, the separation of powers. Under the Constitution the federal judicial function is exercised by independent judges, who, though not elected, are appointed indirectly by the elected representatives of the people. The hallmark of the judicial function is that the judge is independent and objective; the judge does not act as the representative of any section or group in the community. Hence, judicial independence is an essential element of modern democracy in which the citizen's rights and interests, enforceable against government, are of vital importance.

Judges look to precedents and I am no exception. So I was interested to read recently that an English judge, faced with compulsory retirement at the age of seventy-six, was reported to have said, "Of course I am regretful. I have thoroughly enjoyed it. They are a jolly nice bunch of chaps and the work is interesting". Taken as a whole, this is not a precedent that I can follow. The work has been interesting but I am not "regretful" and, although my colleagues are "jolly nice", the presence of Justice Gaudron precludes me from describing them as "a jolly nice bunch of chaps".

My working relationships with my colleagues, particularly those with whom I am sitting today for the last time, have been both harmonious and co-operative. Indeed, what the Court has achieved during my period as Chief Justice is very largely due to their ability and their co-operation. And that brings me back to what I said when I took office as Chief Justice over eight years ago, that is, each Justice of the Court is only a contributor to the decision-making processes of the Court as an institution, for it is the Court that decides the cases and declares the law. The Justices therefore have a collective

responsibility, but that collective responsibility cannot be carried to the point where individual integrity is compromised.

I am told that there is life after judicial retirement, so I look forward to what the future holds. I shall continue to follow the Court's work with interest, reading the judgments with what I trust will be an understanding rather than a critical eye, recognising that, in the determination of difficult and complex questions, there is real scope for genuine differences of opinion.

I thank the representatives of the legal profession for its contribution to the work of the Court. I repeat what others have often said — under the adversary system of justice the quality of the Court's work depends very much upon the quality of the arguments presented to it. I reciprocate the Attorney-General's comments about the relationship which we have enjoyed over the last two years and I much appreciate what he has had to say today about that relationship. I am delighted to see many of my former associates here today and I thank them for making the effort to attend, despite the inconvenience and expense that that must entail.

Last, and certainly not least, I thank my wife for her ceaseless and unfailing support and for her invaluable advice that I should confine my reading to reports and articles that are complimentary to me. As she says, it reduces significantly the volume of material that needs to be read.

It remains for me to offer my warmest congratulations to Sir Gerard Brennan and Justice Gummow, and to wish the Court well for the future.

SWEARING IN OF SIR GERARD BRENNAN AS CHIEF JUSTICE

On Friday, 21 April 1995, in the High Court at Canberra, the Honourable SIR FRANCIS GERARD BRENNAN AC, KBE, took the oaths of office of Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia. Addresses of congratulation were delivered by the Honourable M H LAVARCH MP, Attorney-General for the Commonwealth, Mr N S FOWLER, President of the Law Council of Australia, Mrs S M CRENNAN QC, President of the Australian Bar Association, and Mr WALTER SOFRONOFF QC, President of the Bar Association of Queensland.

In his reply, SIR GERARD BRENNAN said: —

Mr Attorney, Mr Fowler, Mrs Crennan, Mr Sofronoff, members of the Bar, Solicitors and Attorneys, my dear wife and family and friends, ladies and gentlemen.

I am grateful for the excess of generosity in the remarks you have made this morning. It comforts me to think that I must have learnt to conceal my shortcomings in the fifty years since I first entered my father's court to arraign a prisoner at the commencement of a criminal trial. Picking up the indictment and misreading the name of the prosecutor for the name of the accused, I charged one of the dearest and most upright of men with the crime of rape. Such is the camaraderie of the Bar that counsel for the accused leapt to his feet and pleaded not guilty on behalf of his learned friend.

Although your compliments sit uneasily with the truth as I know it, your words and the presence of this large gathering reveal the respect in which you, the legal profession generally and the public hold this Court and the office which I now assume. At a personal level, your good wishes, coupled with the loving support of my family, the valued encouragement of my judicial colleagues and the loyal devotion of my staff go far to dispel the inevitable diffidence with which I enter on the duties of Chief Justice.

My first duty is to welcome those who have honoured the Court by their attendance here this morning, especially those who have come from long distances. The Court appreciates your participation in today's ceremonies. Particularly do we welcome the Right Honourable Sir Harry Gibbs and the Honourable Sir Ronald Wilson, the Chief Justices of the Federal Court of Australia and the Family Court of Australia, the Chief Justices of the Supreme Courts of the several States and Territories and the Right Honourable Sir Thomas Eichelbaum, Chief Justice of New Zealand, who sit with us today. Strictly speaking, I should welcome also Sir Anthony Mason, but insufficient time has passed to separate him from the Court which he so lately led and which he leaves with our unfeigned respect and affection. We welcome His Excellency Mr Martin Burke, Dean of the Diplomatic Corps, Judges of the Federal Court and of the Supreme Courts of the States and the Australian Capital Territory, you Mr Attorney, the Attorneys-General of New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory and the Solicitors-General of the several States and of the Northern Territory.

Today's ceremonies are not empty rituals. This Court's practice is to

administer the Oath of Allegiance and Office in public. That is not a matter of formal procedure. It is a public witnessing of the making of two solemn promises for the performance of which the oath taker will be responsible not only to this Court and this country but also to his Creator. Statute requires that the oath or a like affirmation be taken before a Chief Justice or Justice enters upon the duties of his or her office.

The first promise is a commitment of loyalty to Her Majesty the Queen her heirs and successors according to law. It is a commitment to the head of State under the Constitution. It is from the Constitution that the Oath of Allegiance, which has its origins in feudal England, takes its significance in the present day. As the Constitution can now be abrogated or amended only by the Australian people in whom, therefore, the ultimate sovereignty of the nation resides, the Oath of Allegiance and the undertaking to serve the head of State as Chief Justice are a promise of fidelity and service to the Australian people. The duties which the oath imposes sit lightly on a citizen of the nation which the Constitution summoned into being and which it sustains. Allegiance to a young, free and confident nation, governed by the rule of law, is not a burden but a privilege.

The second promise is to “do right to all manner of people according to law without fear or favour, affection or ill-will”. The form can be traced back to a statute of Edward III, but its substance is of enduring relevance. In substantially that form the oath or affirmation is taken by every judge. It is rich in meaning. It precludes partisanship for a cause, however worthy to the eyes of a protagonist that cause may be. It forbids any judge to regard himself or herself as a representative of a section of society. It forbids partiality and, most importantly, it commands independence from any influence that might improperly tilt the scales of justice. When the case is heard, the judge must decide it in the lonely room of his or her own conscience but in accordance with law. That is the way in which right is done without fear or favour, affection or ill-will. Judges sometimes appear to be remote, belonging to what have been described as “the chill and distant heights”. In the doing of justice that must be so. Justice is not done in public rallies. Nor can it be done by opinion polls or in the comment or correspondence columns of the journals.

The oath requires justice to be done according to law. The content of the duty thus accepted depends upon the jurisdiction to be exercised. In the trial courts of this country the rules of law prevail. And so they must, for it would do no justice to give judgment according to an abstract notion of what is right in the knowledge that the judgment would be overruled on appeal. In appellate courts, the law may authorise a tension between abstract justice and a rule of law to be resolved by an alteration of the rule. In either case, the jurisdiction of the court is fixed by laws and judgment must be rendered in accordance with the judicial method. The security which each of us has is the law. Sir Thomas More of the *Man for All Seasons* is surely right to put to Roper: “This country’s planted thick with laws from coast to coast . . . and if you cut them down . . . d’you really think you could stand upright in the winds that would blow then?”

Insistence on the rule of law has a corollary which is implicit in the terms of the judicial oath. If right is to be done according to law, right will be done only if the law be just. Such tension as there is between justice and the rules of law surfaces most acutely in litigation before the High Court, partly because of

history, partly because of procedure. With the abolition of the last appeals from Australian courts to the Privy Council, this Court was charged with the ultimate responsibility of declaring the law for this country. This did not mean that we were free to cast aside the priceless heritage of the common law of England, but it did mean that this Court had to examine critically those rules of the common law including the rules of statutory interpretation in the light of our own history, culture and social conditions. Long-standing rules of tort and contract, of land law, equity and administrative law, have been revisited in recent years. The same factors and the ever-changing problems of government have evoked renewed examination of the spare text of our Constitution.

Then, with the increasing volume of appeals to this Court, it became necessary to introduce the procedural filter of a grant of special leave. The result is that a considerable proportion of the cases to be decided by this Court involve rules of law that have already proved to be questionable, or at least productive of uncertainty, in the courts below. In cases in both its original and appellate jurisdictions, the Court has had to grapple with issues on which two or more views can reasonably be held. Decisions have not always been reached by more than a narrow majority, but that is not to be wondered at. Where the review of existing rules is in question, the judicial oath to do right according to law sometimes places emphasis on abstract justice, sometimes on the existing rule. And when constitutional doctrine is to be re-examined, the frustration of powerful interests frequently follows. It is inevitable in these circumstances that the decisions of this Court would be seen by some to have a legislative flavour.

But this Court is not a parliament of policy; it is a court of law. Judicial method is not concerned with the ephemeral opinions of the community. The law is most needed when it stands against popular attitudes, sometimes engendered by those with power, and when it protects the unpopular against the clamour of the multitude. But judicial method is concerned with the equal dignity of every person, his or her capacity to participate in the life of the community, to contribute to society and to share in its benefits; it is concerned with the powers entrusted to governments and the manner in which those powers are exercised. Judicial method starts with an understanding of the existing rules; it seeks to perceive the principle that underlies them and, at a deeper level, the values that underlie the principle. At the appellate level, analogy and experience, as well as logic, have a part to play. Judgments must be principled, reasoned and objective, as Sir Anthony Mason said yesterday. And, most significantly, each step in the reasoning must be exposed for public examination and criticism.

Herein lies a difficulty. The work of this Court is rightly a subject of considerable public interest. Though the arguments heard here are often at a high level of abstraction, the emerging principles have a concrete effect on the liberties, relationships and property of individual persons, both natural and artificial. Therefore the work of this Court should be subject to informed public scrutiny. But how is it possible for the public to be informed? It is unrealistic to expect the arid fields of law to be tilled in the popular press, much less in the brief and adversarial encounters of the television screen. Of course, there are some few highly competent legal journalists, but an adequate analysis of legal principle and its significance may be precluded by limited space or may give way to a story of more gripping, if ephemeral, interest. The problem of fostering informed public appreciation of the laws by which we are governed

and protected is, I venture to suggest, a problem far from satisfactory solution. It will not be resolved by superficial comment or by an expression of pleasure or disappointment in advancing policy or interest.

Nevertheless, the public interest in the judgments of this and other courts is a clear and gratifying indication that, in this country, we are governed by the rule of law. The courts have earned and maintained public confidence by their unfailing response to every reasonable application, by their impartiality and the fearless administration of the law. Today's focus is on the work of the High Court, but it must be remembered that the face of justice is more often the face of the magistrate and the judge at trial.

To accept the office of Chief Justice in the judicial branch of government is a signal honour. To share in the rigorous debates in this Court with colleagues who bear mutual respect for the intellectual integrity and fierce independence of one another is a continuing satisfaction. I assume this office with gratitude for their friendship and support. I thank you for your attendance here today.

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CORRIGENDUM

180 CLR 295-321, year of judgment: For "(1979)" read "(1977)".

183 CLR 94, line 14: For "liabilities insured" read "liabilities incurred".

183 CLR 324, line 9: For "(1982) 150 CLR" read "(1982) 150 CLR 169".

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