

**Launch and Inauguration of the Council
of the Sikhs in Law Association
at the Supreme Court**

21 April 2023

Welcoming Remarks

Lord Leggatt

Welcome to the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom. It is a privilege to have you here for the inauguration of your Council and to be invited to attend this event myself.

When in 1965 Sir Mota Singh QC (as he later became) came from Kenya to the UK with the aim of practising at the English Bar, it is difficult to overestimate the challenges he faced. Although he had already qualified as a barrister in England and then established himself as one of the leading advocates in Nairobi, that stood him in little stead. According to his obituary in the *Times*, he made hundreds of applications for legal jobs which were all either ignored or rejected. Eventually, he managed to persuade a group of property companies to employ him as a legal adviser. He so impressed his employers that they helped him to set up in private practice at the Bar. His practice went from strength to strength. A decade later, in 1978, he was appointed Queen's Counsel. And, as I am sure most of you know, not long afterwards, in 1982, Mota Singh was the first ever member of a minority to be appointed to the bench in this country when he was appointed a Circuit Judge. He was also the first judge for some 300 years not to wear a wig in court. He sat at Southwark Crown Court where he served with distinction for 20 years, rising to become deputy Presiding Judge. His portrait hangs in the judges' dining room at that court.

Much has changed for the better in British society, in the legal profession and in our judiciary in terms of equality and diversity since Sir Mota Singh blazed that trail. Others have passed through doors that he prised open and have opened further doors themselves – foremost among them Sir Rabinder Singh who achieved another first when he became the first member of a minority to be appointed as a judge of the Court of Appeal. And he still has the best part of his judicial career ahead of him. Another member of the senior judiciary here this evening is Sir Pushpinder Saini, who will be addressing you in a few minutes time.

But it would be complacent to suggest that the battles have all been won, that prejudice and discrimination no longer exist and that equality has been achieved. That is unfortunately not the case. And we will never be able to say that equality has been achieved until we can see that it has been achieved from the composition of the legal profession and judiciary at all levels of the legal system, including this Court.

There is not time for me to discuss this topic in these welcoming remarks. But let me highlight two vital issues which seem to me particularly relevant to this event.

First, it is stating the obvious to say that, to want to enter the legal profession, a person has to see it as a world in which they can picture themselves and to which they can envisage themselves as belonging.

Second, entering the profession is only the beginning. To stay the course and prosper in their careers, people need support, encouragement and - let us be honest - to make connections that may help them along the way. Everyone faces pressures in their professional life and suffers setbacks. But I recognise the additional pressures that exist if you are marked out from the majority of your colleagues by obvious differences of appearance, as well as by less obvious differences of culture and background. One source of such pressure can be a feeling that you are perceived as (so to speak) a showcase for your community, so that your successes or failures are seen by others not merely as individual but as symbolic.

The Justices of the Supreme Court recognise the importance of these issues and the challenges they pose, and we are trying to make a contribution to the work needed to address them. Among other initiatives, each of us takes part each year in a session with members of a school sixth form called "Ask A Justice", where we answer questions from the students about anything (within reason) that they want to ask us. We also all judge at least one student moot, where the students have the opportunity to argue their case here in Courtroom 1 of the Supreme Court. Another initiative in the last two years (which I hope will become an annual fixture) is that we have had with us for a week interns sponsored by an excellent organisation called Bridging the Bar. Speaking for myself, I feel that I have learnt more from the interns than they can possibly have learnt from me.

So I am glad to be able to express on behalf of the Court our strong support for your Association, its Council and your outreach work. It seems to me, if I may say so, that in both the areas I have mentioned you have the ability to play an

immensely valuable role. You have a power to encourage and inspire young people in the UK Sikh community to see themselves as future members of the legal profession – a power much greater than someone like me has (although that does not mean that I cannot try!) You also have the power to provide support, mentoring and encouragement to other members of the UK Sikh community at different stages of their careers – particularly at critical points in mid-career such as when someone may be contemplating a career change, such as applying to become a judge.

There need not, and should not, be any contradiction between commitment to universal human equality and membership of a particular community which is an important part of your personal identity. Your Association and its laudable aims are witness to that. I wish you every success in your endeavours. And I repeat my warmest welcome to you all.