

Mary Prior QC – No. 36 Bedford Row Chambers, Leicester

Mary Prior who was one of 12 women barristers from the regions appointed to silk following the 2016-17 QC Competition. She practices exclusively in serious and complex criminal offences and is a specialist in historic allegations of institutionalised sexual abuse. Mary comes from a northern working class background - her father was a coal miner, as indeed were several generations of her family on her paternal and maternal side going back to the 1600s. Mary had several part-time jobs from the age of thirteen, including in Woolworths, the Co-operative and Sainsbury's. She later worked "in more bars than I can remember" to finance herself through university. There followed a one-year graduate traineeship with Volvo, after which Mary worked for five years as Clerk to the Essex Magistrates Committee. This was where her interest in the law was first sparked.



The Courts Service wanted her to gain a professional qualification. She applied for the legal practice course but it was full so she applied to the Inns of Court School of Law. Having exceeded her own expectations as to her own ability she applied for and obtained sponsored pupillage. As she could not afford bar school she applied for and got a sponsored pupillage at the Crown Prosecution Service. Whilst working for the CPS, Mary had her first three children.

Mary moved from the CPS to chambers and enjoyed working in a mixed practice covering civil, family and criminal. However, she discovered that some clients would not brief you for family work if you did criminal cases, and she was effectively told to make a choice - and opted for criminal because she loved advocacy.

The spur for applying for silk was when "my clerk sat me down firmly and told me it was time". She did not apply that year or indeed the next year but did so in the third one, having promised her clerk faithfully that she would do so. Mary considered that obtaining silk would have several advantages for her and her clients. In particular, it could enable her to ease up on the relentless and increasingly heavy workload of the previous fifteen years as a very busy senior junior. The prospect of working at that rate until retirement age was not appealing. The changes to legal aid had exacerbated an already overloaded junior criminal bar. Mary did not anticipate any sort of 'ideal' work/life balance as a QC, but there would definitely be less burning of the midnight oil.

The other key motivator for applying for silk had been the prospect of moving away from doing so much serious sex crime work. She anticipated having more choice in the cases she accepted in future. You had to be in the right frame of mind to apply for silk, Mary said. You reached at age where "it felt right". But Mary said there was no way that she would have applied again for silk if she had been unsuccessful. There was no 'ego' involved in her decision to apply for QC so it would have been disappointing but not devastating to have not succeeded.

Mary found the application form to be daunting but one that made you sit back and have a good think about whether you really met the criteria. Mary said that asking for an assessment was "a bit like reading your own obituary!" She was "astounded to discover" that one judge whom she approached with considerable trepidation "actually liked me!" She asked practitioner colleagues and opponents not to tell her if they gave her "an awful assessment" (she does not think any did).

Mary did not think training was necessary for a silk application. It was important to complete your own application form. In doing so, you gained a better understanding of whether your cases were really ones of substance. She went on holiday the week before her interview and

relaxed - despite having been told by someone that she was in for a “dreadful grilling” and being given suggestions (which she ignored) of how to turn around the interviewers’ questions to fit what you wanted to tell them. Mary simply told herself five minutes before the interview ‘just answer the question’. And in reality, she found the interview to be “like a friendly chat with very skilled interviewers”, in fact to such an extent that she left it feeling that the interviewers had given her an easy time, perhaps out of sympathy! So when she received the results from QC Appointments she had not really expected a ‘successful’ letter. She was of course delighted, although everyone else around her seemed more excited, and it took a couple of weeks for it to sink in.

Mary’s overall experience of the application process was positive, and she hoped that more advocates from non-standard backgrounds would think about applying for silk. It was an objective, evidence-based, competency-based and rigorous process. It assessed how good you were now and not who you knew, what grades you had obtained at school or what university you attended. She did not think that everyone appreciated that this was how it is now, that there was still a perception that your background could hold you back.

Mary said that it remained incredibly difficult for those from poor backgrounds to get into law and advocacy. It had in fact become harder to obtain pupillages as more young people competed for fewer places in chambers. There were too many people coming through the system. To compete, Mary suggested that young people should take all opportunities to get involved in advocacy, for example through debating societies, public speaking and by attending court to observe advocacy in action (surprisingly few do so in Mary’s experience). “The best way to learn is to do and see what you want to do, including sometimes watching other people doing it (advocacy) badly”.

Other suggestions were work experience with the probation service, where you would get the opportunity to begin to understand more about the vulnerable people who come through the court doors. These were the types of real life experience (rather than of mini-pupillages) which would impress Mary from those seeking pupillages. Mary ran a couple of competitions locally to provide some state school pupils with the opportunity to show how the judicial system worked, and to help demystify it. In the law, your individual characteristics (gender, ethnicity, educational background etc.) did not matter to the client – all that mattered was your ability to do the job. Mary said that much more needed to be done to make the law more accessible as a career. Lack of confidence was a major factor in holding people back from more humble or unusual backgrounds, and anything young people could do to increase their confidence (e.g. singing in a school choir) could help boost that confidence.

As to those colleagues contemplating making an application for silk, Mary suggested that they “do it for the right reasons”. Applicants should appreciate that as a QC you would be a role model. Your motivation should be more than one of personal ambition. The QC role carried responsibilities. As a silk you should be there to help and inspire more junior colleagues. As to the character and integrity aspects of the process, Mary was keen to encourage would-be applicants to apply even if there was some issue that they felt would concern the QC Panel. Any such issue would be treated in a straightforward, fair and not unpleasant way. She suspected that relatively few barristers who have got to an age where they are ready to apply for a silk, will have a spotlessly clean sheet. Only exceptionally serious matters were likely to scupper an application for silk, and every issue was examined on its merits, quite separately from consideration of the other competencies.

The silk ceremony itself was extremely moving, Mary said. She felt extremely privileged to join the bar’s elite. QC was “a badge that said you’re damn good” irrespective of your background. She felt herself extremely lucky to have such interesting and remunerative job. It was moreover a career where being an older woman was no disadvantage, indeed to the

contrary. Mary intended to use her appointment to reach out to other women (and others who had fewer advantages), continuing a proud tradition of mentoring at No. 36 Chambers, “where the women looked after one another.” This included protecting younger women barristers from bullying behaviour and sexist language, which thankfully was no longer tolerated as it had been when Mary joined the bar.