

Mr Louis Flannery QC, Stephenson Harwood, London

Louis Flannery QC is a partner of and head of international arbitration at Stephenson Harwood. He specialises in arbitration and litigation with a particular emphasis on fraud and/or conflict law issues. He was one of five solicitor advocates appointed Queen's Counsel in 2017.



Louis, whose French mother and Irish father were first generation immigrants, was raised in South London by his mother and attended a local comprehensive school. After retaking failed A levels (in Maths Physics and French), Louis secured an RAF scholarship to study aeronautical engineering. Despite passing all the academic and practical modules, his ambition to become an RAF pilot was thwarted when he failed an eye-test. Louis was encouraged by his stepfather to change career tack and to study Law.

Having applied through clearing, Louis secured a place at Southampton University. His first essay was described by his tutor as the worse one he had seen in twenty five years. He suggested that Louis might wish to consider switching to studying engineering. However, despite a disastrous start, Louis was encouraged by his stepfather to apply his mathematical mind and to use shorter sentences, and also to read the judgments of Lord Denning, the former Master of the Rolls, which whetted Louis' appetite for the law and the legal profession. He persisted, graduating with a lower second-class LLB. Louis subsequently "tripped through various doors", qualifying as a solicitor and a member of the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators (CIArb) in the early 1990s and becoming a solicitor-advocate in 2002. Having moved firms a few times, he ended up working at SJ Berwin, specialising in construction law and then litigation and arbitration. Having pointed out some editorial errors in a leading textbook on arbitration law, Louis was offered an editorial position on the publication, eventually becoming its co-author (Merkin and Flannery's commentary on the Arbitration Act 1996). This work helped him considerably when it came to meeting the requirements of Competency A (Understanding and using the law) in the Silk competition.

Louis applied for QC in 2016 when he considered that he had worked on enough cases of sufficient substance in the previous two to three years. In Louis's view, the QC scheme greatly favoured barrister applicants because unlike most solicitor-advocates (particularly international arbitrators) barristers generally had much more opportunity to do oral advocacy in the high courts of England and Wales. Louis, however, still considers that the dual system works very well. It was just that it was extremely testing having to fulfil both roles at the highest level. Louis was not recommended for Silk that time, but was successful on his second attempt in 2017.

Louis considered that it was vital to choose your assessors carefully. He believed that having what he suspected was an adverse assessment that had been damaging to his first application (although the QC Selection Panel stressed that having a single uncorroborated criticism was never fatal to an application). Louis had also been unhappy about the form in which certain criticisms had been put to him, as he felt it might not have properly reflected the context in each case. Nonetheless, Louis believes that the QC selection process was exemplary, despite his disappointment first time around. The system was open, transparent and properly rigorous, thorough and intense: It was vital for the integrity of the 'QC badge' that only the very best advocates were appointed.

As to preparing for interview, Louis said that he used the services of an "excellent" coach from one of the training companies. She helped him improve his application form, working through several iterations with him, emphasising different cases, adding or deleting details. Completing the application form was one of the hardest things he had ever done, even with that help. "You had to distil all your cases and competencies, indeed your entire career, into some 12,000 characters (not words). He also had mock interviews with the

consultants. Louis said that he did not obtain outside assistance on his second application form (though he did have another mock interview) as he was then much clearer as to what was needed, and only had to update his application form with respect to the cases falling within the applicable two/ three year period.

Diversity was a difficult competency. The Panel sought evidence not only of an understanding of the issues but also of proactivity. It was important to be aware of, celebrate and positively utilise diversity, yet at the same time be able to see beyond obvious characteristics such as gender and ethnicity and value people for their individual skills, experiences and potential. Whilst anybody with sufficient ability and commitment could aspire to reaching the highest levels of the profession, in reality only a minority of the highest levels of the judiciary, for example, were women or from ethnic minorities - and even fewer came from working class backgrounds.

Mentoring had played no part in Louis's career development but he had been inspired by seeing outstanding advocates such as Iain Milligan QC of 20 Essex Street Chambers in action. It was "an astonishing privilege" to have been led by such advocates. As to balancing the demands of work and life, this was certainly no easier now Louis was a Silk. If you appeared as a QC as a solicitor you stood out. And the QC "marque" was widely recognised and respected internationally (evidenced by his attendance at many foreign seminars and symposia where the brand is recognised). As a result, the expectations were enormous. However, it felt extremely good to have received the recognition which the letters bestowed. Louis admitted he had always enjoyed having letters after his name (he is now FCI Arb and FRGS) but these two were by far the most valued!