

## **Sarabjit Singh QC, 1 Crown Office Row Chambers, London**

Sarabjit Singh QC, one of the new silks appointed in 2018, was the son of immigrants from a farming community in Punjab, India. He says it was a familiar story: his parents both worked in factories when they first arrived in Britain in the 1970s, Sarabjit's father later working as a cab driver, then both parents putting in long hours in running a corner shop.



By the age of just 14, Sarabjit had already decided that he wanted to become a barrister - because he “loved a good argument” and “using language to persuade people”. He regularly challenged whatever adults - including teachers - told him if he did not agree with it. The self-employed Bar was also attractive to him as he did not want to “have someone telling me what to do”. Sarabjit attended a local comprehensive school which was far from academic but where he had “a great time” enjoying the down-to-earth culture. He secured a place at Oxford University and then Bar school, being the first one in his family to attend university or work in the legal profession.

He applied successfully to 1 Crown Office Row, where he has since remained. The set appealed to him because it did a mixture of work and he had at that time not yet decided in what area to specialise. Having been appointed to the Attorney-General's Panel, Sarabjit found himself working increasingly on tax cases. He particularly enjoyed this work as it required great focus on interpretation of statutes and what words meant. He also got great satisfaction from what he called ‘more human’ areas of law like clinical negligence and acting for survivors of abuse, “where you can see what the law actually means to people's lives”.

2016 was a really very good year for Sarabjit as he found himself increasingly up against silks in heavyweight cases. He had early on set himself the ambition of becoming a QC whilst still in his 30s, so 2017 seemed like the perfect year to make his application. Sarabjit maximised opportunities to get into the higher courts on substantial cases, to which end he secured as many Government cases as possible. He was in the Supreme Court twice (once on his own and once as a leader) and also in the Court of Appeal several times and in the European Court of Justice. In preparation for his application, Sarabjit spoke to silks recently successful in the competition, and to the QC Secretariat who he said were more than happy to provide advice and guidance. He also received some assistance from a consultancy firm on completing the application form and on competency-based interviews.

Sarabjit stressed that it was essential to put a great deal of effort into the application process in order to give it your “very best shot”. He also allowed himself sufficient time to complete the application form and to prepare for interview. He said that if you honestly felt that the time was right, that you had the cases of substance and fully understood what the Selection Panel were seeking, you should not hesitate in applying for QC.

In the days before his interview, Sarabjit went through his application form again, making sure that he knew his cases “back to front”. This meant he was able to talk about them in clear, simple terms during his interview. He also thought about all the possible questions that he might be asked. Sarabjit thoroughly enjoyed the interview. He found the interviewers down-to-earth, professional, fair and extremely thorough: it was clear to him that if he had been ill-prepared they would have found him out.

He read up on all the latest reports on diversity as this was the competency that had initially been the hardest for him to enunciate. However, having studied the guidance and thought a good deal about the subject it “all fell into place”: He realised that it was all about awareness and in taking action. It was essential to provide concrete examples of his proactivity on his application form so that at interview he could talk credibly about what he had done.

Sarabjit felt that the guidance for applicants could be improved as regards Competencies A (understanding and using the law) and B (written and oral advocacy), where he felt that it would be helpful to have a few examples of a hypothetical case to show what the Selection Panel were seeking. In general, he felt that anything that the Panel and the secretariat could do to make applicants feel less reliant on using outside consultants would be welcome, and would reduce the considerable cost of making a silk application.

As to what advice he would give to young people interested in a career in advocacy, Sarabjit said that they needed to work hard to achieve great academic results, attend court and involve themselves in moots and mini-pupillages. They should set themselves a general career route and also short-term goals along the way. There was no substitute for hard work at every stage on the path.

He believed mentoring (which he himself had benefitted from in chambers) was important, and he was himself working with younger people in groups currently under-represented in the legal profession, particularly at the higher levels. There were "some very talented people out there" that had yet to be reached. Sarabjit considered that educational opportunity and social class remained significant barriers. The profession was still overwhelmingly middle-class and fee-paying school educated, albeit the gender and (particularly) ethnic balance within those ranks was steadily improving. Talented young people from working-class backgrounds were still not being encouraged sufficiently to apply to university, and much less to Oxbridge - from where the higher levels of the profession still tended to be recruited.

Sarabjit was elated at being appointed silk as it meant he had a badge that was universally recognised as denoting excellence. He had already noticed a difference in the way his peers, other colleagues and judges spoke to him and listened to what he had to say. It bestowed a new level of authority on him in the eyes of the client. Sarabjit also admitted to rather enjoying "sitting in the front row and getting to look properly swish in that lovely tailored court coat and waistcoat!" It was also an exciting time for him in that it felt a bit like starting out again, as he built up a silk-level practice. He did not anticipate any slackening off in the work pace and consequent improvement in life/ work balance, but that was fine.