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Law Council
OF AUSTRALIA

Ceremonial Sitting of the High Court of Australia on the occasion of the farewell of the Chief Justice, the Honourable Susan Mary Kiefel AC

Speech delivered by Luke Murphy, President of the Law Council of Australia at the High Court of Australia, Canberra.

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May it please the Court.

I too respectfully acknowledge that we are meeting on the traditional land of the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples, and pay my respect to their Elders past and present, and Elders from other communities who may be here today.

I also acknowledge the Attorney-General, the Hon Mark Dreyfus KG MP; President of the Australian Bar Association, Mr Peter Dunning KC; all judicial officers, dignitaries, family, friends, and, most of all: Chief Justice Kiefel. I am honoured to appear on behalf of the national legal profession to congratulate you on an exemplary career.

We have come together today to honour Your Honour's contribution to the administration of justice in this country as the 13th Chief Justice of the highest court of our land.

The words uttered by then Attorney-General Alfred Deakin in support of establishing the High Court, have been shared many times here. I apologise for repeating them, but they remind us that the objective of the High Court as envisioned over a century ago was that its highest function would be "exercised in unfolding the Constitution itself.

This role continues, 12 decades later.

The Constitution as Australia's supreme law establishes the framework of Australia's system of democratic government. The High Court, led by Your Honour, is the interpreter and protector of this supreme law.

It seems fitting then that this ceremony follows on the heels of a Referendum on constitutional change. As we are all aware referenda are historic and rare occasions in Australia's history but a vital part of our democratic process.

Today is the closing of a chapter in our Nation's legal story. It is a chapter which will tell of the significant positive impact and influence Your Honour has had on our Nation's legal history.

As was evident at the ceremonies held in 2007 to welcome Your Honour's swearing in as a Justice of the High Court and again as Chief Justice in 2017 the adjective 'first' was generously thrown about, as it will no doubt be today, in recognising the many firsts, and doors opened, throughout Your Honour's career. I will allow other speakers to address those. Except to note that sadly for our community and profession, your invaluable contributions and wisdom as the first female Chief Justice of the High Court has come to an end. You will be missed.

I recently had occasion to reflect on the importance the life stories of other noted leaders of the legal profession in Queensland played in their contributions and impact on the profession. What was very evident from those reflections and also from your own story Chief Justice is that many leaders of our profession have, contrary to commonly held popular belief, not come from what is often described as traditional legal backgrounds. It is I think a credit to our profession and our community that this occurs and continues to do so. It ensures our profession and our community benefit from balanced considered and compassionate leadership and Chief Justice the entire Australian legal profession and community thanks you for that.

Your Honour has been an exceptional leader of the nation's highest court. Your Honour's unwavering commitment to justice, the people and our profession, has been reflected in many ways again which have been addressed by others.

Your Honour has been a generous supporter of the legal profession and has never hesitated to share your expertise and experience whenever called upon. Indeed only a few weeks ago Your Honour was the keynote speaker at the 2023 National Access to Justice and Pro Bono Conference.

Your Honour closed by saying: "Views about how access to justice may best be achieved may have changed over time, but there can be no doubt that this goal continues to be worth pursuing."

Your Honour has inspired us all with your integrity and willingness to make hard but fair decisions in the public good, and in pursuit of that goal.

On the occasion of your swearing in, Your Honour said: "I have been given a great responsibility. With the co-operation of my colleagues I trust that I shall discharge it well and justify the confidence that has been reposed in me."

As you leave the High Court, I think you can be very sure and very proud that you have not only achieved the goal you set yourself, but exceeded it.

Your Honour, the nation owes you a great debt. On behalf of the Australian legal profession, I thank you most sincerely and deeply for the contributions you have made and wish you well for your retirement.

May it please the Court.

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