



Law Council
OF AUSTRALIA

Ceremonial Welcome for Justice Richard Schonell SC

Speech delivered online by Dr Jacoba Brasch QC, Law Council of Australia President at the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia, Sydney.

14 December 2021

May it please the Court. I too acknowledge this land's traditional custodians and pay my respects to Elders past present and emerging.

Madam Attorney, Chief Justice, all judicial officers, signatories, friends – and critically, Your Honour and your family.

Justice Schonell, it is an honour to address the Court on behalf of the 90,000 Australian lawyers to welcome your appointment. In doing so, I acknowledge your family: your mother Margaret; your sister Catherine and her husband Frank; your brothers Stefan and Jamie; your wife Rosemary; your son Alexander and his partner Marie; your daughter Tilley and her partner Arnav; and nieces and nephews Sam, Grace, Charlotte, and Asher.

Madam Attorney, as my Presidency of the Law Council of Australia draws to an end, the most frequent thing I have done is speak at ceremonies such as this, to welcome appointments. The family lawyers of Australia thank you for your excellent appointments and their timely nature. We all very much appreciate your understanding, that family law matters.

Justice Schonell, you fit firmly into that category of an excellent appointment.

Your Honour was born in Brisbane, the city from which I beam in. For those in the audience who know anything about Brisbane, then the name Schonell is synonymous with hard work and distinction.

Your grandfather, Sir Fred Schonell, was an academic and educationist of considerable renown, appointed as the University of Queensland's first full-time salaried vice-chancellor in 1960. An obituary called him '*a legend in his own lifetime*', possessing '*the Schonell magic*', which, it would seem, has endured. Your grandmother Eleanor developed academic testing methods for children, including children with cerebral palsy. Their names are borne by the Eleanor Schonell Bridge and Sir Fred Schonell Drive in Brisbane.

Your Honour's father, Dr Malcolm Schonell, was '*a remarkable physician*' practising from St. George Hospital in Kogarah, to working with the Inuit in Northern Canada, to Cape York communities.

Indeed, Your Honour's accent was cultivated by years in Edinburgh and Vancouver, due to your father's work, and inspired the schoolboy nickname '*the Yank*'.

Whilst at school, having taken a hit on the rugby field, and receiving some medical attention as a result, you noticed your mother running towards you. She looked down at you with great concern, when you said, "*Mum, get off the field, I am stalling for time*". Some have queried whether you have used the same subterfuge in the courtroom.

You joined the newly established Family Law Chambers in the mid-2000s, where you have been a member ever since. The Hon Michael Kirby spoke at the Chambers' opening, reflecting on the history of barristers' chambers in Sydney and their names, often taken from High Court judges' surnames. Departing from this tradition, and located adjacent to the Family Court of Australia – far from traditional digs in Philipp St – Chambers offered a '*premium service in a specialist jurisdiction*' for the client – which also reflects your career approach.

At your Chambers, amid a sea of formal barrister portraits, clients are pleasantly surprised by your profile on the chambers' website: featuring a photograph of you out fishing in sunglasses. It also identified Bruce Springsteen and the Coen brother's *The Big Lebowski* as significant influences.

Despite the latter's influence, court users need not anticipate your judgements featuring the lines "*Yeah, well, you know, that's just, like, your opinion, man.*" or "*This is a very complicated case ... a lotta ins, a lotta outs, lotta what-have-yous*".

To the contrary, you are noted for your dedication to language, formidable charisma, and articulate presentation. Your insightful discourse cuts through to the real issues, distilling simplicity from complexity.

The preservation of the Schonell name is well in place: Alexander has just passed the Bar exams and Tilley is a family law solicitor. Benjamin has a background in radio and is currently working with young people in Byron Bay. Law has become a true family affair, with the presence of your brother Stefan at the Bar inspiring judges to remark, '*There are more Schonells in this Courtroom than Chanel's in a dress shop.*'

Outside the law, Your Honour appreciates art, travel, history and nature. Your Honour's love of the water began with your father reading *Swallows and Amazons* to you as a child in Scotland.

Despite having owned various vessels, from tinnies and speedboats to a share in a small sailing yacht, life on the water has not always been smooth sailing. You once transported a boat with a trailer, only for it to fall off in the middle of a highway. Another time, you took a dinghy out, only for the motor to conk out just as you were heading for a wave.

One weekend, your family believed you to be working furiously on a brief. In fact, you were assiduously studying to pass the marine rescue exam. Although appointment to this Bench is indeed a high honour, to you, nothing could outrank one day qualifying as a ferry driver.

On the Bench, you will give everyone a full hearing, doing your utmost to deliver justice quickly for the sake of families coming before you. Those requiring the assistance and resolution of this Court are most privileged to gain, in Your Honour, a wise and balanced Judge equipped with a full spectrum of experience.

I congratulate you on your appointment and wish you well for your time on the Bench.

May the Court please.

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