IN THE DISTRICT COURT

OF NEW SOUTH WALES

THE CHIEF JUDGE  
THE HONOURABLE JUSTICE D PRICE AO

AND THE JUDGES OF THE COURT

TUESDAY 15 JUNE 2021

**SWEARING IN OF HER HONOUR JUDGE ROBINSON AS A JUDGE OF THE DISTRICT COURT OF NEW SOUTH WALES**

The Honourable M Speakman SC MP, Attorney General, on behalf of the New South Wales Bar

Ms Joanne van der Plaat, Senior Vice President, Law Society of New South Wales, on behalf of solicitors

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(Commission read)

(Oaths of office taken)

PRICE CJ: The oaths will be placed in the Court archives and the Bible will be suitably inscribed and presented to Judge Robinson as a memento of this occasion. Judge Robinson, on behalf of all the judges of the District Court of New South Wales, I very warmly welcome you and wish you all the very best in your continuing judicial career. Mr Attorney.

ATTORNEY GENERAL: May it please the Court, I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we gather, the Gadigal of the Eora Nation. I pay my respects to their Elders, past, present and emerging.

Your Honour Judge Robinson, on behalf of the State of New South Wales and the Bar it is my great privilege to welcome you and congratulate you as a judge of the District Court of New South Wales. First, I acknowledge and congratulate the members of your family who are here with us today, your partner Stephen, your daughter Libby, your son Will and your parents, Elizabeth and Michael.

I also pass on my congratulations to your family members not with us today but tuning in to the live stream, your brother Chris, streaming from Vietnam, and your sister Lisa.

Your Honour was the middle of three children. You were educated at Loreto Normanhurst, excelling academically and at sport, a very good tennis player and a passionate cricketer. You were always class captain and in your final year, school captain. At school you were a natural leader and popular with the nuns and teachers.

From an early age you wanted to study law, in fact you inspired your younger brother, who also became a lawyer. Your father, involved in APEX, introduced you to public speaking. You joined the Loreto Normanhurst debating team. Here your natural ability as an advocate first shone through. You were the team’s secret weapon in mock trial and as third speaker in debating. Your long held dream to study law was realised when you commenced at Sydney University in 1987.

After graduating you worked briefly as a paralegal, before seeing an ad for a graduate solicitor at a private legal firm in Dubbo. At the interview in Sydney, the solicitor in Dubbo was very impressed by your academic prowess, your sporting ability and your enthusiasm for Dubbo itself. Wondering why a city girl with the world at her feet was so keen to come to a country law firm, they snapped you up right away. But the Orana region was not unfamiliar to you, you had friends at school who were boarders and you had visited the region with them. You liked the friendly social scene, and a place where sport is so central to community life was a natural fit for you.

That country law firm was Peacocke, Dickens and Price. The Price, of course, later becoming our Chief Judge. There you gained wide experience in all aspects of the law, from both private and Legal Aid criminal matters, to Local Court civil litigation, to representing children in care matters, to family law and industrial relations. From the outset you were diligent and hardworking. Whether it was a parking matter or a murder case, you applied the same effort. You had a keen intellect to all aspects of general practice, but a special talent for criminal matters and advocacy.

Dubbo at the time was something like a legal practitioner’s boot camp. This suited high achievers like yourself. You worked your way through a high volume of cases, many of which were complex. It was also very male dominated. This was not to say the men did not welcome you joining, but there were hardly any female judicial officers. You, along with Judge Yehia, and after you Judge Beckett, were among the first female legal practitioners, all trailblazers.

During those early days in Dubbo it was collegial and you enjoyed learning from colleagues. While it was collegial, that is not to say it was not competitive, particularly between legal professionals on the sporting field. Working hard during the week outside of work you, like many others, trained hard and slipped into Dubbo’s sporting life with ease. Many of Dubbo’s top legal practitioners, including your Honour, could be seen on weekends running, swimming, cycling, training each other, and competing against each other in marathons and triathlons. I am assured that there are no really embarrassing stories to tell about your Honour and this speaks to your good character and the fierce loyalty of your friends.

You spent 11 years at Peacocke, Dickens and Price. You were popular in the office and in the community. They described you as a wonderful person with an infectious personality.

From Peacocke, Dickens and Price you went to Legal Aid. Again the work was high volume and complex. More than half of the client base were First Nations people. Here you displayed your skills as a gifted advocate. You worked extremely hard while bringing up your two children. Your daughter recalls getting off the bus, heading up to your office above the Grapevine Café, where you would feed her biscuits or give her money to go and buy a milkshake or any other food, bribes really, to keep her occupied until you finished work.

I am told Will and Libby’s only real gripes about your parenting are that their lunches were packed full of healthy food, while the other kids had Roll‑ups and chips. They were not allowed to watch much TV and they say that is as traumatic as it got.

In Dubbo many of your colleagues saw early on your skills in advocacy and described you as a gifted advocate. Notwithstanding your experience, you have also been described as someone who is prepared to acknowledge that you do not know everything and therefore ask many questions to find out.

On one occasion you were instructing a barrister in an arson case involving the Mungeribar Manor, a landmark building along the railway line between Narromine and Trangie. The 1912 two-storey house, which featured decorative art brickwork, wraparound verandas, leadlight windows, several fireplaces and a cedar staircase was irreparably damaged by the flames. The barrister you were instructing was representing a man accused of lighting the fire. Your Honour asked many questions and found midway through the committal proceedings a beekeeper who had looked at the house and actually found a beehive inside the walls. He gave evidence that showed the fire was the same sort and had the same sort of smells as others caused by bees in the wall. It resulted in the accused man being acquitted.

Your Honour was never on the wrong side of magistrates in Dubbo, including the most seasoned and cantankerous.

While at Legal Aid you began studying for the New South Wales Bar exam. Your children recall you working very hard, always in the green room, as you called the study at home, reading up. Your tutor recalls you were a very good pupil, the kind that did not need checking on, was proactive about telling him what cases you had coming up.

Still, during this time you were highly involved in the lives of your children, taking your son Will to rugby and cricket on Saturdays, and watching your daughter Libby row.

In 2013 you were sworn in as a magistrate and have been at Blacktown’s busy courthouse ever since.

Your Honour is committed to legal education. You sit on the education committee of the Local Court and have given presentations on sentencing for more serious matters. You have delivered presentations on the law and advocacy for the Bar Association, the Law Society, Young Lawyers and other education providers.

As well as presentations and formal education, you have been committed to supporting and mentoring others. From your earliest years at Dubbo you assisted student interns and showed professional generosity to new practitioners by helping them with processes such as how to do a basic plea. You have continued this right throughout your career. At Blacktown Courthouse you are well known for kindly showing the way to those who are new to court procedures.

You have been at Blacktown Courthouse for eight years. It is a busy court, particularly on Wednesdays when you do domestic violence matters. You are known for your kindness and generosity, for being approachable and supporting staff, particularly those who are new at working in a court.

I am told your handwriting takes special deciphering and has at times been indecipherable even to yourself. I understand that some staff at Blacktown Courthouse are more fluent in Robinson than others. But you are known for being approachable, always willing to give advice and guidance, and you have forged strong relationships with staff throughout the courthouse.

Fitness continues to be important to you. These days you do not do many triathlons, but you regularly do a 5am gym class before going to work, and golf has become a new hobby.

Your children, now young adults, have followed in your footsteps of academic success and love of sport. Will is in medicine and Libby is studying psychology, majoring in criminology. You still watch their weekend sport. Libby is an avid surf boater and you watch her wherever she competes. You have also enjoyed spending time helping Libby with her assignments, providing invaluable advice and guidance on considering the different perspectives, particularly of marginalised people in criminology. Both Will and Libby describe you as their idol.

While during the week you are extremely busy maintaining an efficient and respectful courtroom as Magistrate Robinson, weekends have been a time for you to let go a little. Friendships are important to you and on weekends you catch up with many of your nearest and dearest for brunches and lunches. You remain partial to reading and escape the world of law and crime with none other than a good crime novel.

Judge Robinson, these matters which colour the road which brings you here are a testament to your Honour’s experience, determination and strength of character. While you were on the bench of the Local Court, a former Supreme Court judge appeared before you. He tried to run the case the way he thought it should be run. You were not deterred by this. With your signature calm and poise you informed him that you were the judicial officer and whoever comes before the bench must present their case properly. The former Supreme Court judge took your sobering advice. This is a good example of those traits of experience, determination and strength of character combining in one instance for a legal professional. In the words of the late Ruth Bader Ginsburg you can disagree without being disagreeable.

Your Honour Judge Robinson, you have put these wise words into practice since you were a young middle child, making your voice and your cause heard. You went out to Dubbo at a time when the profession was very male dominated. You are an inspiration to women and will be an asset to the District Court. You will bring gravitas, poise and calm to its bench.

Your appointment is an acknowledgment of the skills, expertise and specialised knowledge you have acquired throughout your service to the law, and of the hard work, dedication and personal sacrifices that you have made. Thank you for your contributions to the law, for your service to the law to date and for those to come. Congratulations on your appointment and I offer you the warmest of wishes for your career on the District Court bench. May it please the Court.

PRICE CJ: Thank you, Mr Attorney. Ms van der Plaat.

VAN DER PLAAT: May it please the Court. I acknowledge the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation, the traditional owners of the land on which this Court stands and pay my respects to their Elders, past, present and emerging. I also acknowledge any indigenous Australians present today.

I come before the Court on behalf of the solicitors of New South Wales to offer congratulations and wish your Honour well in your appointment to the District Court of New South Wales.

Your Honour’s appointment today seems to confirm that one of the surest routes to the District Court bench is now via the Mitchell Highway. Your appointment places you in the company of Judge Williams, Judge Beckett and Judge Smith, all recent appointees who have close and happy associations with the regional centre of Dubbo. However, your Honour’s journey into law began much further east. As a student at Loreto Normanhurst, your Honour envisaged a future career in the law and was awarded dux in 1986.

Upon graduating from the University of Sydney, your Honour was admitted to the roll of solicitors in 1992. As we have heard, your Honour then made the decision to launch your legal career with a stint in a regional practice, Peacocke, Dickens and Price in Dubbo. This would have a defining impact on your life and legal career.

In any interview with the *Daily Liberal* newspaper, your Honour remarked:

“The metropolitan area is great, but it is not the be all and end all. Country areas offer opportunities to work as a solicitor, go to the bar and have a successful practice.”

As a regional practitioner based in Cooma, I could not have said it better myself.

At Peacocke, Dickens and Price, your Honour gained broad experience in criminal and family law, litigation and industrial relations. Your Honour found a sure mentor in solicitor, Robert Duffy, and grew as a legal practitioner in the collegial atmosphere Dubbo provided. Your Honour has always been someone who saw the law as a profession, not as a business, and worked easily alongside those with a keen sense of service.

A new challenge presented itself with the establishment of the Dubbo Legal Aid office which your Honour joined in 2003. Your former colleagues still remember your Honour for your prodigious work ethic, detailed methodical approach to your work and intense loyalty.

Your Honour put down deep roots in the area and was an active member within your local community. The Law Society was a frequent beneficiary of this generosity. Your Honour served as the secretary of the Orana Law Society from 1995 to 2005, and helped mentor the next generation of young lawyers. In a happy piece of foreshadowing, your Honour even stepped in to play the role of magistrate in the Orana Law Society’s mock trial competitions for secondary students.

In 2001 your Honour became an accredited specialist in advocacy, passing the Law Society’s demanding peer assessment program. This put you in good stead for your transition to the bar and the thriving regional practice that you would establish in 2008. Your Honour developed a well-deserved reputation for being a skilful advocate and able litigator.

Advocacy became so central to your sense of self that upon your appointment to the bench in 2013 your Honour quipped, “I imagine I will feel overwhelmed to start with and I will definitely have to stop advocating for the defendant.” Today’s appointment is proof that you did indeed manage to stop.

Your Honour’s experience in civil, family, children and criminal matters was highly sought after by the Local Court, as was your patience, humility and pragmatic legal approach.

Over the last eight years your Honour has distinguished yourself for your hard work and sound judgments from within the great workhorse of the New South Wales justice system. Your Honour’s experience with children and in family law matters proved invaluable at the Children’s Court, while your formidable organisational skills helped your Honour coordinate matters at Blacktown Local Court.

I would like to conclude today by noting that your Honour’s career echoes something of the founding purpose of this Court. The District Court was established after the discovery of gold saw more people move westward. With the Supreme Court not regularly visiting regional areas, the District Court was an attempt to increase access to justice across the colony. This move outwards to ensure that justice just does not stop at city limits or that proper representation is not only a privilege for coastal cities, resonates with your own legal career.

Your Honour brings a wealth of knowledge, integrity and practical experience to the District Court of New South Wales. The people of our State are privileged to be served by you in this role and solicitors have every confidence that just like before, you will make an exceptional judicial officer.

On behalf of the solicitors of New South Wales, congratulations, your Honour. As the Court pleases.

PRICE CJ: Thank you, Ms van der Plaat. Judge Robinson.

JUDGE ROBINSON: Thank you, Chief Judge, Mr Attorney, Ms van der Plaat, fellow judges, former colleagues, family and friends. We meet today on the lands of the Gadigal People and I pay my respects to their Elders, past, present and emerging.

Mr Attorney and Ms van der Plaat, thank you for attending today. I am humbled by your generous and kind words. You have cast a wide net in sourcing information or sourcing contributions for your speeches. I am not at all surprised about the complaint about my appalling handwriting. Perhaps this appointment is a creative way of saving my former colleagues and registry staff from deciphering my contributions to the bench sheets.

I feel honoured, privileged and still a little surprised to be here. Many of those close to me know how much I have enjoyed my role as a Local Court magistrate. I am aware that a great challenge lies ahead of me, but it has been made easier so far due to the warm welcomes and generous offers of assistance which I have received from many of my new colleagues. Offers which I will use frequently over the next days, weeks and months.

In preparation for today I have read the swearing‑in speeches of some recent appointees, seeking guidance and inspiration. That proved to be not such a great idea as many appointments prior to mine have made notable appearances in well-known cases during their distinguished legal careers. As you have heard from the speeches today, I have not, so, perhaps not my best idea. Upon reflection, however, I am proud of the diverse path that my legal career has taken. It is one that has exposed me to different aspects of the criminal justice system, particularly those that are based in the country.

Having started my legal career with Peacocke, Dickens and Price in Dubbo, I see much significance in being appointed to a bench today that is presided over by Chief Judge Price. I never worked with the Chief Judge, but have practised in the shadow of his reputation as a smart, conscientious and highly respected lawyer amongst the Dubbo legal community and beyond.

In Dubbo I worked as a solicitor in private practice and public practice, as you have heard, and I am so grateful to the solicitors who trained me, guided me in my early years, and impressed upon me the standards required of a member of the legal profession. I learnt the importance of preparation, organisation, communication and common sense in the practice of law. I learnt the importance of maintaining a good reputation as an advocate and an officer of the Court. I learnt the importance of treating colleagues and practitioners with decency and respect.

I am grateful for those lessons and I bring them with me to this new role and acknowledge those lawyers, some of whom who are here today, either in person or connected remotely. I give particular thanks to Belinda and Ron, Andrew, Robert, Stephen, Howard and Anna, and Eric.

My experience at Legal Aid heightened my awareness of the need for our justice system to be available to all court users, particularly those financially and socially disadvantaged, and to First Nations people, as has been referred to.

Many great advocates are lured to Dubbo, particularly to work in public practice, and I was fortunate to be able to spend many hours in Court watching and learning from them, some of whom sit on this bench today, namely Judges Yehia, Beckett, Craig Smith and Judge North, although I do not think Judge North is here today. Many others who practice in Dubbo have achieved appointments to the Local Court, the public defenders, or sit in respected criminal chambers. It was a wonderful training ground and one that taught me many skills.

My time at the bar did present some challenges - great challenges, such as working alone without the support of formal chambers, but I was fortunate to receive the support of the local legal community and the guidance of my albeit limited number of colleagues. I ran my first trial as a barrister in Parkes before Judge Bennett and appeared on numerous occasions before Judge Lerve in Dubbo. Both those judges and many others before whom I appeared, particularly out west, modelled experienced, patient, courteous and knowledgeable judicial officers and I aspire to those standards.

I feel honoured to now join many esteemed and highly regarded judges on this bench and I look forward to working with my many new colleagues.

Whilst I am excited and proud of this appointment, it is with considerable sadness that I leave my position on the Local Court bench as I have loved it. I have thrived on the challenge, the diversity and the intensity of the work. Most importantly I have enjoyed the collegiality. I have such admiration for so many magistrates and am grateful for those that have helped me, fielded my urgent phone calls, listened to my debriefs or fed me the answer to a question.

Working together in such an environment inevitably leads to the forging of close friendships which will continue beyond today. I would particularly like to thank my mentor, Magistrate Maiden, my swearing-in buddy, Magistrate Douglass, my sounding board, Magistrate Feather, all of those with whom I worked closely at Blacktown, my teachers, Magistrates Mabbutt and Guy, and most importantly the chicks; Magistrate Skinner, Huntsman, Thompson, Kennedy and Stafford, none of whom can put up an umbrella, but all of whom have been a loving, supportive and colourful group of friends who have made my time on the Local Court bench so much more rewarding. I look forward to the laughs in times to come.

I feel strong connections with many other magistrates and I apologise for not mentioning you all by name, but you know who you are and I thank you for your friendship and support during the past eight years.

The Chief Magistrate, the current deputies, Jane Mottley and Michael Allen, and the deputies who are my colleagues, Judge Culver and Judge O’Brien, deserve a special mention. Thank you all for your assistance, wisdom, guidance and opportunities to extend myself through coordinator and educational roles. The Chief Magistrate recently announced his deserved retirement. The Local Court and citizens of New South Wales will miss him greatly and I thank him for his extensive contribution to the bench over the past 33 years.

The real heroes of the Local Court are the registry staff. Their tireless contribution is often unnoticed and at times unappreciated, but I have worked closely with intelligent and committed officers of the Court who are conscientious in ensuring that the justice system runs smoothly. After four years at Blacktown I will reminisce about the laughs, stories, tears and meals which underpin a strong team processing an enormous workload.

The staff at Broadmeadow before them nursed me through the juggle of a daily commute, amidst a crash course in Children’s Court practice. I have also worked with the Dubbo registry staff in different capacities and I am sure our paths will cross again some time.

Our work life should be a small part of the whole and there are many important people behind the scenes who helped me get ready to face work each day. Public occasions are not my preferred way of thanking those in my private life, but on this occasion it would be remiss not to acknowledge my family and close friends. My parents, Michael and Elizabeth Robinson, are here today. They taught me a strong work ethic and to take pride in my achievements. I thank them for their love and support over many years and for all they do for me and my children.

I am immeasurably proud of my beautiful children, Will and Libby. I am inspired by the way you live your lives. You are such fine people, each dedicated to your careers and your sporting endeavours, and to having fun along the way. Thank you for your support and understanding through the challenges of balancing work and home in different cities, and thank you for your pride in me. I would not be me without you.

To my partner Stephen, the most patient, thoughtful, caring and understanding friend, he shoulders much and has his work cut out for him over the months ahead. I am sure he is looking forward to that.

My brother Chris and his family, as you have heard, are beaming in from Vietnam and I hope my brother is enjoying hearing some of his anecdotes repeated. Whilst we miss you being here today, and my sister Lisa also, we look forward to a time when the family can all be together again.

Graham, thank you so much for being here today, for sharing the raising of our children and the delight in the incredible people that they have become.

Finally, thank you to my friends, some of whom have travelled some distance to be here, particularly Robert, Lynne, Simon and Jodie, Graham, Belinda and Ron, and Henry. Some of us go back a very long way, to school, to uni, College of Law, Dubbo and then more recently, our Sydney days at our children’s schools. We have had many great times together with many more no doubt to come. Thank you all for taking the time out of your hectic lives to share today and for being proud of me and for being excited for me.

As I look around the room I see other familiar faces, some from Blacktown in more recent times and some from my past practice life. Thank you to each of you for honouring me by your attendance today.

I am truly humbled by this appointment and, to be frank, a little scared, however I will embrace this new challenge, as I have done others in the past. I will work diligently and conscientiously to honour the trust and faith that has been placed in me by this appointment. I thank you for the opportunity and thank you all for being with me here today.

PRICE CJ: Thank you, Judge. Before we adjourn I invite you all present to join us for morning tea. The Court will now adjourn.