

Susan Denham

Chief Justice Denham has been a judge of the superior courts for over twenty years, having been a practising barrister for twenty years prior to that. She was appointed to the High Court in 1991 and to the Supreme Court in 1992. In July 2011, she was appointed Chief Justice of Ireland, by the President, Mary McAleese.

Chief Justice Denham is the longest serving member of the current Supreme Court and in her career has distinguished herself as one of the finest judges in the history of the state. Her judgments are thoughtful, erudite and clear. While upholding at all times the Rule of Law and delivering clearly principled legal judgments, Chief Justice Denham's judicial pronouncements exude a striking humanity. She seems acutely aware of the difficulties faced by ordinary people in this country, of the trials and tribulations of family life, of the impact of crime on individuals and communities, of the effects of discrimination or abuse of rights, and of the pressures of the corporate world (particularly in a time of economic crisis). Chief Justice Denham's clear appreciation of the complexity of the task of adjudication shines through her judgments. There is a self-awareness that can only come with disciplined intellectual thinking and this distinguishes her as a great Irish judge.

Chief Justice Denham's understanding of the impact of law on the lives of people may stem from her time spent as Junior Counsel on the Midlands and Dublin Circuits in the 1970s. She has spoken extra-judicially on a number of occasions of the cases she worked on at that time, which related to disputes about, for example, the borders between farms or about cattle and rights of way. These cases gave her a window on Ireland which was somewhat removed from her student days at Trinity College Dublin, at the Honorable Society of King's Inns and at Columbia University in New York.

When Chief Justice Denham was called to the Bar in 1971 she was one of only two women litigating before the Irish courts; the other was Mary Robinson. There were no female superior court judges at that time, and would not be for another nine years (with the appointment of Ms Justice Mella Carroll to the High Court). Susan Denham was often the only woman in the courtroom with all male judges, court staff, and fellow barristers. It takes nothing short of courage and determination to enter a male-dominated state structure, to strongly represent one's clients interests, to make arguments on their behalf and to defend those arguments under pressure. It takes nothing short of courage and determination to blaze a trail for those following in your wake, and this is what Susan Denham did.

The first woman to be appointed to a major ambassadorial post on behalf of the United States, Clare Boothe Luce, once said

"Because I am a woman I must make unusual efforts to succeed. If I fail, no one will say, 'She

doesn't have what it takes'. They will say, 'Women don't have what it takes'."

Whether consciously or otherwise, Chief Justice Denham has, throughout her career been subject to this pressure to succeed. She has not only succeeded, but also excelled.

When she "took silk" in 1987, rising from Junior to Senior Counsel, Chief Justice Denham represented the State in a number of significant extradition cases and she became an expert in Judicial Review. She spent ten years at the inner Bar before being appointed to the High Court (1991) and to the Supreme Court the following year.

Chief Justice Denham's appointment to the Supreme Court made history. She was the first woman ever to sit on that bench and for eight years, she was the sole female member of the Court. In July 2011, she again made history when she was appointed as the first female Chief Justice of Ireland.

As Chief Justice, Susan Denham is forward-looking and unafraid of change. Since her appointment to the superior courts, she has been central to bringing the Irish court structure into the 21st century. In the 1990s she chaired the Working Group on a Courts Commission which produced a series of reports leading to the establishment of the Courts Service in 1999. She was the Honorary Secretary of the Committee on Judicial Council and Ethics which, in 2000, presented a report advising the establishment of a Judicial Council. She chaired the Family Law Development Committee until 2001 and was instrumental in the decision to establish the Family Law Reporting Pilot Project. She chaired the working group on a Court of Appeal, which published a report in 2009 recommending the establishment of a general Court of Appeal in Ireland. She strongly advocated for this new Court. She has an ongoing interest in court infrastructure, in the transparency in the court system and in the use of technology in court. This is working to great effect in the Commercial Court, which was established following a recommendation from the Committee on Court Practice and Procedure, which was then and is now chaired by the Chief Justice.

Chief Justice Denham regularly engages with her counterparts internationally and is a Vice-President of the Network of Presidents of the Supreme Judicial Courts of the European Union. She chairs and sits on innumerable committees. She has held the post of Pro-Chancellor at Trinity College Dublin. She is a bencher of the Honorable Society of King's Inns and an Honorary Bencher of the Middle Temple in London. In 2013 she was elected a member of the Royal Irish Academy.

We are delighted to pay tribute to Chief Justice Denham and we are delighted that she has agreed to accept the highest award that Dublin City University can bestow.