



Attorney General's Office

The Rt Hon the Baroness Scotland of Asthal
QC

Attorney General

**National Pro Bono Week 2008
MPs' Reception**

11th November 2008

16.00-18.00pm

**Members' Dining Room, The House of
Commons**

I would like to welcome you to the reception today, which marks recognition for and celebration of National Pro Bono Week 2008. Vera is also here today to welcome you as well, which is a great indication of her support for pro bono work and the importance she attaches to it, as she is actually meant to be in Belfast today and has delayed flying out so she can be here. I am very pleased you have been able to join us here on Armistice Day, when you will have been busy with events to mark the bravery of those who served and those who died in the two World Wars.

I am here today in a personal capacity, rather than a ministerial one. Pro Bono is a time honoured tradition of the legal profession, rather than a government initiative. It is also something I hold very dear. I am gratified that so many of you have attended here today to celebrate how much is achieved by pro bono. A number of you are here as exemplars of pro bono or what I would term “pro bono heroes” and I will return to this point a little later.

I was delighted to launch National Pro Bono Week 2008 yesterday with the kind permission of the Lord Chief Justice, who loaned us his court, courtroom number 4 at the Royal Courts of Justice. I can report back to you that the court saw a very enthusiastic mock trial staged by BPP Law School with the assistance of the National Centre for Citizenship and Learning. The trial was “judged” by a jury of students from the Behaviour Support Service resource Base in Camden. It covered a topical subject matter, that of guns and knives.

I am pleased to say that BPP Law School and Streetlaw are running the same trial with different students on various days this week at the Royal Courts of Justice. The purpose of the Streetlaw trials is to teach people about rights and responsibilities in relation to the law.

I would also like to tell you about a very interesting event I attended last night, which was a debate run by Debate Mate. Debate Mate offers ways for children and students to develop their public speaking and debating skills and has led to very significant improvements for the people who have participated. We saw one young man who six years ago was illiterate, but has now been offered a full scholarship to Harvard. Another student who is the first black Student Union President at Oxford University spoke last night about the importance of developing debating skills and how they help children and students increase their expectations for what they can achieve in the future.

Today is a day to celebrate what pro bono provides and what it achieves. I have always been struck by how pro bono work brings out the very best in the lawyers who are carrying it out. Those of you who know me well know I make no apologies for my belief that lawyers should start pro bono early in their careers and that if they do, they will find they become hard-wired to do it and it becomes second nature for them. As you may have heard me say before, doing pro bono work is part of what every good lawyer does; it is in their DNA.

I am delighted to tell you that we have present at the Reception a number of those very good lawyers (and some very good *non-lawyers* too), who quite clearly have pro bono running through their veins as well as patterned into their DNA. We have described these people as pro bono heroes, because that is what they are. Far too many of them carry out their pro bono work without recognition or applause for what they do.

I can tell you that they are modest about their achievements and do not look to be celebrated. But their achievements are very significant and they make a huge difference to the people who are in great need of legal assistance but cannot afford to pay for legal representation. The heroes here today represent an excellent selection of the people who are quietly giving up their time across the country. By giving up their time, they help to make justice happen for people to whom it would otherwise be denied.

There is an increasing awareness that many people in the legal and other professions are carrying out pro bono work without broadcasting what they are doing, and without it being known about generally. It is unfashionable to congratulate lawyers for their generosity and their interests in seeing justice done. This fact is recognized at the highest levels. I can, for example, tell you that the Lord Chief Justice, in his welcome speech at the launch event yesterday morning commented that:

“The spirit and ethos of the legal profession, which is so often overlooked, is that they act pro bono as champions for people who cannot act for themselves. It is not that this is not appreciated, it is that it is *not even known* about.”

I am acutely aware of this, just as the Lord Chief Justice is aware of it and I would like to take some steps to reverse this trend. It is with that in mind that I welcome to this Reception the pro bono heroes. They are champions for those unable to act for themselves. I am aware of what they have done and will continue to do. I want them to know how much they are appreciated. I give them my thanks, not only for what they have done already (and it is a significant amount) but for all the pro bono work they have yet to carry out. They are inspirational; they have inspired me and I hope they will inspire you as well.

The heroes have been nominated for their achievements by members of my domestic Pro Bono Committee, including Mike Napier QC, my Pro Bono Envoy (whom I thank for his continued support), representatives from the Law Society, LawWorks, the Bar Pro Bono Unit, A4ID (Advocates for International Development), FRU, ILEX, AMICUS, BPP Law School, the College of Law, the Government Legal Service, ProHelp and the International Lawyers' Project. The heroes work with these organisations on a weekly and in some cases, daily basis, and help to support the delivery of pro bono where it is most needed.

There is a roll call of honour in this room, standing right in front of me. It lists all of the heroes invited to attend today. Sadly not all of them have been able to attend, but I hope you will look at the roll call in any event and familiarise yourselves with modern day pro bono champions. Moreover, I encourage you to familiarise yourselves with what a

modern day pro bono champion *looks* and *sounds* like. I hope that each of you will have an opportunity to speak with at least one hero, and to find out more about their pro bono work. I know that you will be impressed with what they do. You may find that they offer valuable services and that you know of people who might benefit from those services.

As you will have seen, the strap line for this year's National Pro Bono Week is "Giving Time, Making a Difference". The special guests here today provide some very tangible examples of what this actually means in practice. It would be wrong to single out one hero over another, not least because they are all too modest to give us a full account of their work.

I can, however, tell you that their work is very diverse and ranges from those who volunteer their time at law centres every week, to those who have set up specific projects to support, for example, victims of domestic violence, or people affected by murder and manslaughter. We have people who deliver pro bono in person as well as those who have adopted "virtual" means to provide it. We also have people here today who provide international pro bono, including people who have offered their time to support and train lawyers in foreign jurisdictions, where the legal systems are developing and need support and assistance to ensure they will be models of excellence for the future.

What I can tell you about *every* hero here, is that they have given up their time in order to assist those who cannot pay for the help they so desperately need. If you were to speak to

the people their actions have helped, you would be certain that the time given has definitely made a difference.

You will also have seen exhibitors' stands around the room. The exhibitors come from organisations that help to facilitate and coordinate pro bono services. If you haven't already met them, I encourage you to meet these lawyers and pro bono providers. Just like the pro bono heroes, they provide invaluable work across many different constituencies. For those of you here who are MPs, I would say that when you hold your constituency surgeries and meet constituents with legal problems, it may be that these organisations can help. Please keep in mind these organisations and how much assistance they can provide.

I would like to talk to you about some interesting and important developments in pro bono this year. In addition to my domestic committee, I also chair an International Pro Bono Co-ordinating committee. Last week it launched a database of international pro bono projects, to help inform and coordinate what is being done in international pro bono. Once this database enters its main phase of development, it will be housed within the pro bono website www.probonouk.net. Probonouk.net was chosen to host the database because it is recognised as a central point of information for pro bono providers and those looking for help. It is a national website, maintained by key pro bono providers and it helps to broadcast and support their work and provide a first port of call for people seeking information about pro bono. I encourage you to go and look it up on the internet when you next have a suitable opportunity.

This has been a very good year for pro bono. I have mentioned the launch last week of the International pro bono database. The Committee also launched a statement of principles for international pro bono work (endorsed by all three legal professions as well as the International Bar Association) at the Reception – a best practice guide, if you like, of what international pro bono work should involve, and what it should achieve.

This year has also seen the launch of the Access to Justice Foundation, on 7th October. It is a very important charity, set up in order to receive monies ordered to be paid under section 194 of the Legal Services Act 2007. The purpose of section 194 is to make sure that where a party wins a court case but is assisted pro bono, the losing party will be ordered to pay costs to a charity (now the Access to Justice Foundation) and those costs will be used to help coordinate and facilitate pro bono elsewhere. The Foundation will distribute the monies it receives on a strategic basis.

The enactment of section 194 of the 2007 Act and the creation of the Access to Justice Foundation have also led to the creation of the Regional Legal Support Trusts (established so far in Wales, the North West and the Midlands but more are in development), which are modelled on the London Legal Support Trust.

The London Legal Support Trust helps local law centres, with funding and support and the Regional Legal Support Trusts will act in a similar way, providing assistance for law centres in the regions. In addition, they will help co-ordinate pro bono delivery,

identifying where pro bono is most needed on a regional basis and how it will best be delivered.

We live in exciting times for pro bono work and I am so very pleased to be able to report back to you on all the marvellous developments that are underway. Finally it remains for me to say that I hope you enjoy today's Reception. I am delighted to see all of you here.