



Cherie Blair QC on being beaten to a job by Tony

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Cherie Blair QC – an arbitration specialist and wife of the UK's former prime minister Tony Blair – has called for more gender parity in law, telling an audience in New York how she was beaten to a job as a barrister by her husband despite being the better lawyer of the two.



Cherie Blair QC

In a keynote conversation with Wilmer Hale Pickering Cutler and Dorr partner John Pierce at the New York International Arbitration Center's first "Grand Central Forum", Blair reflected that nowadays over half of law graduates are female in the UK and the US and have no difficulty getting traineeships.

"But there's still a problem, isn't there?" she said. "Like [in] many other

professions, women go in in large numbers but they drop out in large numbers as well.”

Women also achieve partnership in law firms less often. If we don't take positive action to address this and simply wait for “natural selection” to take its course, it could be 2115 before there is gender parity in the partnerships of New York law firms, she said. “Frankly, guys, we can't wait that long”.

Blair – who runs her own law firm and consultancy in London and Washington, DC, Omnia Strategy, offering international arbitration among other services – related how tough it had been finding a job as a woman in the law in the UK in the 1970s. The NYIAC's chair **Judith Kaye** – the first woman to serve on New York's highest court who embarked on her career a decade earlier – probably had “far better stories”, she said.

“I think that [Judith] and I would both agree that if anything has changed in our careers it would be the perception that women just don't do law [and] in particular, that women are by no means advocates,” said Blair.

She herself had been told by her “very distinguished professor” at law school that women should not be barristers because their voices do not travel as well as men's. “I hope you will realise that I don't have any trouble shouting,” she told the audience. “[The professor's] wife must have been a very understanding and quiet woman for him to think that a woman could not make her voice heard.”

"We're going to have to take the boy"

Blair told the audience she came from a working-class family in the north of

England – her grandfathers were a miner and a merchant seaman and her grandmother and mother both left school at 13. She was the first person in her family to go to university, which was “a huge thing”.

“I was just lucky, I was quite a clever girl,” she said. “And the nuns in my [Catholic] school gave me the impression that if I worked hard there wasn’t anything I couldn’t do.”

At age 14, she recalled announcing that she would be the first woman prime minister of Great Britain. “I did get to number 10 Downing Street but not in the way I perhaps thought,” she said.

Blair (back then, **Cherie Booth**) went to the London School of Economics and then to Bar School, where she came top of her year in the country in the Bar Exams – “which is a boastful thing to say but is relevant to what I’m about to tell you,” she said.

It didn’t cross her mind that being a woman might be a problem in forging a career but, when it came to seeking pupillage in London barristers’ chambers, she found it was.

“You would find people who would say to you, ‘Cherie, we just don’t take women in these chambers’. Or, ‘We are very progressive, we take women. But we have a woman already.’ So they couldn’t possibly take another one because what would happen if, heaven forbid, they both fell pregnant at the same time.”

“I did eventually find someone foolish enough to take me on [**Derry Irvine**, the founder of 11 King’s Bench Walk and later Lord Chancellor from 1997 to 2003],”

she said. "And at the end of my year's training as a barrister, he took me aside and said, 'Cherie, there is one post available here, but there are two contenders [...] One of them is you and the other one is the boy. And of course, obviously we're going to have to take the boy'. To which I agreed because obviously that's what happened in the law. They took the boy, which was a bit unfair because even he accepted I was the better lawyer".

"As it turned out, it was quite a bad choice for them, because after seven years, that boy had gone on to do something else whereas here we are 36 years later and I'm still a lawyer".

The boy, she said, was Tony Blair "and we all know what he went on to do".

"But let me tell you, he would not say he was a lawyer today. It just goes to show that to make assumptions about what women do, what men do is a dangerous thing".

International arbitration, as much as any other field of law, has to keep up with "modern trends", she stressed.

Not just a PM's wife

Blair did not speak in such detail about the rest of her career but, suffice to say, she did find a chambers that would take her and went on to become a successful barrister. She was made a silk in 1995 and a recorder (part-time judge) in 1999.

In 2000, four years after her husband became prime minister, she founded Matrix with other leading barristers. She practised there for 14 years before establishing

Omnia.

At Omnia, she has led a counsel team that successfully defended Albania against a US\$1 billion UNCITRAL arbitration claim brought by a Texan energy company and provided counsel to Pakistan in parallel ICSID and ICC arbitrations arising from a dispute with an Australian mining company. She has also advised other countries including Gabon and Kazakhstan.

She also regularly sits as an arbitrator and was added to the ICSID panel of arbitrators by East Timor in 2012. She is currently on the ad hoc annulment committee hearing an application to annul an award against Turkey.

She established a foundation for women in 2008 and, in 2013, was awarded a CBE for services to women's issues and to charity in the UK and overseas.

For most of her legal career she used the name Cherie Booth but has recently started using her married name, increasing her recognition in international circles.

A forum for debate

The Grand Central Forum – the name of which echoes New York's Grand Central Station – brought together 90 leading international arbitration practitioners to discuss not only gender diversity but the role arbitration plays in a democratic society.

As Kaye said in her opening remarks, “this type of event goes to the heart of [the] NYIAC’s mission of providing a forum for engaged debate and supporting New York’s vibrant international arbitration community”.

The centre's executive director **Alexandra Dosman** told *GAR*, "With New York seeing an uptick in arbitration matters, we saw the need to bring together local and international experts to discuss industry trends."

During her conversation with Pierce, Blair spoke about her field of legal specialisation before moving into international arbitration, human rights law. She stressed the important role that multinational companies can play in the development and promotion of human rights.

Blair was also asked about the current controversy over investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) in investment treaties and pending trade deals. "The system of international arbitration plays a key role in upholding the rule of law – all parties, including governments, are held to account by a fair and impartial process," she said.

As well as the conversation with Blair, the event included a panel moderated by Sullivan & Cromwell's **Joseph Neuhaus** and entitled "2014 in a New York Hour," which looked at significant recent developments in international arbitration.

Luis Martinez, vice president of the International Centre for Dispute Resolution, **Rocío Digón**, counsel at the ICC International Court of Arbitration, and **Olivier André**, vice president of International and Dispute Resolution Services at CPR Institute, highlighted recent changes in the rules of their institutions, as well as trends in the number of cases they administer and the geographic composition of tribunals. They also shared forecasts for the future.

Caline Mouawad of King & Spalding provided an analysis of the IBA's updated rules on conflicts of interest for counsel and arbitrators in international disputes and

Alexander Yanos of Hughes Hubbard & Reed reviewed two key cases on the enforcement of international arbitral awards rendered against sovereign states: *BG Group v Argentina*, heard by the US Supreme Court in early 2014, and *Mobil Cerro Negro v Venezuela*, heard by the District Court of the Southern District of New York this February.

A year in the life of the NYIAC

The Grand Central Forum – which will be a yearly event – coincided with the publication of the NYIAC's [annual update](#). The hearing centre has hosted 34 hearings since it opened in 2013, covering a wide variety of industries and involving parties from more than 15 countries. Most of the hearings have been under the rules of the ICC International Court of Arbitration, followed by the rules of the ICDR, the AAA, UNCITRAL and the CPR.

Thanks to the centre's technology, testimony has been streamed from Chicago, Miami, Singapore, Seoul and Laos and been simultaneously translated from French, Korean, Mandarin, Portuguese and Spanish.

As part of its mission of enhancing New York as a leader in the international arbitration field, the NYIAC has also developed training and education programmes and hosted events.

The event took place on 16 April at NYIAC's headquarters at 150 East 42nd Street in central Manhattan.



Pierce and Blair

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