

A passionate advocate

Lord Grabiner QC steps down in December after nine years as chairman of LSE's Council and Court of Governors. He spoke to **Judith Higgin** about why he has been such a staunch advocate for LSE and its principles.

'I knew I wanted to be a lawyer but I had no expectations of what university would be like. I used to take the number 6 bus from the family home in Hackney to the Aldwych. From day one it was a fantastic new experience.'

When Tony Grabiner arrived at LSE at the age of 18 in October 1963, he was the first in his family to go to university. He was educated at the Central Foundation Boys' Grammar School in Shoreditch and then took his first step to becoming a lawyer, but he says he didn't know much about LSE before he applied for a place.

'I knew I wanted to go to university and that I wanted to become a lawyer but I did so with trepidation. My parents needed a lot of persuading. In particular, they were not willing to go along with my applying to any university outside London so I applied to LSE, King's and UCL. King's said I didn't have the appropriate qualifications (which was probably true), UCL offered me a place for the following year but LSE offered me an interview. All this happened in the summer after my A level results, immediately before the start of the new term. I was interviewed by Colin Tapper. My memory is that the interview was not going brilliantly until he asked me if I had seen any films recently. I had seen Fellini's *8½* the night before but had not understood it. He turned out to be a Fellini fan and conducted the rest of the interview in the form of a monologue. I listened politely and he offered me a place to read for the LLB degree with immediate effect.'

What are your memories of LSE in the 1960s?

'I didn't get involved with the union or join many societies. I devoted most of my time to studying and attending lectures given by some of the most outstanding legal academics in the country – Bill Wedderburn, Aubrey Diamond, Gerald Dworkin, Stanley de Smith and many others. I was fortunate to be sitting at the feet of so many distinguished academics. I was enthused by them and by the subject. It was a most exciting time. I also played a lot of cricket. 'After a short time I moved from home into Commonwealth Hall, which other LSE graduates will know is a University of London residence in Cartwright Gardens in Bloomsbury, where I had even more fun. This was the 1960s. Great music, interesting people, long hair – I have a vivid recollection of Mick Jagger walking through the Main Building towards the place where the old library was situated. He had no interest in going into the library. His purpose was to sidestep the screaming fans who were waiting for him to go in

to record the Friday TV programme *The 6-5 Special* at ATV House which then backed on to LSE.'

Tony Grabiner graduated with a first class honours degree in 1966 and went on to gain an LLM from LSE with distinction in 1967.

'LSE was the turning point in my life. Many of my contemporaries from school became hairdressers and cab drivers but some went into the professions. Getting a degree was crucial to me and my future career. I stayed on to do an LLM and taught at the School for a while. At that time I was contemplating an academic career. I then did the exams to qualify as a barrister. Bill Wedderburn, who taught me labour law and company law, introduced me to the then chairman of the Court of Governors, Morris Finer. He was a distinguished QC and, after trying to talk me out of going to the Bar (only for a few minutes), he said he would find me a set of Chambers and a suitable junior barrister who would take me on as his pupil. I hoped, but did not expect, that much would come of this because Finer was so distinguished and he didn't know me from Adam. It was also difficult to get a pupillage in a good set of Chambers. I nearly fell off my chair when at around midnight a couple of days later he called me with the telephone number of the Clerk to the Chambers at One Essex Court and said that he had fixed me up with the best junior at the Bar.'

He was duly called to the Bar in 1968 and did a pupillage with Sam Stamler in those Chambers. His specialisations were in commercial law, commodities disputes, oil and gas litigation, arbitration and a host of related subject areas. He was appointed as standing junior counsel to the Department of Trade (ECGD) and then a junior counsel to the Crown. In 1981, after only 13 years in practice and at the age of 36, he was appointed Queen's Counsel.

He has acted over the years for a large number of colourful and interesting clients including Robert Maxwell (in connection with the Leasco scandal) in the early 1970s, Rupert Murdoch and *Times Newspapers* in the battle between Fleet Street and the print unions, Morgan Grenfell in the Guinness affair and Mohammed al Fayed in the litigation which arose out of his battle with Tiny Rowland and the acquisition of Harrods. His regular clients over the years have included banks, oil companies, insurance companies, media companies and a host of others including the Bank of England, the Financial Services Authority and the Press Association. In a recent case he acted for Apple Computer Inc in its dispute with Apple Corps (The Beatles) in connection with the



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i-Tunes music store and the use of the Apple mark. In that litigation he revived a 1960s soundbite to the effect that 'even a moron in a hurry' would not confuse Apple's downloading system with a record label. He won that case and shortly afterwards the long running dispute between the parties was resolved. It will soon be possible to download Beatles songs from the Apple Music Store.

Since 1994 he has sat as a Deputy High Court Judge of the Chancery and Queen's Bench Divisions. He is a director of the London Court of International Arbitration.

He became a member of the LSE's Court of Governors in 1991 and vice-chairman in 1993. 'It was Ralf (now Lord) Dahrendorf who brought me back into the LSE fold as a governor. Sir Peter Parker was chairman of the Court at that time. One day Sir Peter phoned and asked me to join him at the American Bar in the Savoy Hotel. Towards the end of the second bottle of champagne, I agreed to become his vice-chairman.'

'I was on the appointment panel for Tony Giddens who came to the School in 1997. As soon as I met him it was clear to me that he was the person for the job. The rest of the committee took the same view. When it came to the appointment of Howard Davies, I chaired the panel. He, like Tony, has proved to be a most outstanding appointment. The School has been very fortunate with the quality of these directors and the skills they have brought to the role.'

Has being a lawyer helped you as chairman of LSE's Court of Governors?

'I think it has helped, but then I would say that. My predecessor, Peter Parker, wasn't from a legal background but he was a very experienced chairman. My successor, Peter Sutherland, is also a lawyer – formerly the attorney general of Ireland. I think legal skills are useful in running meetings. I think they also help when it comes to identifying the issues and the core of a problem.'

What are you most proud of during your nine years as chairman?

'For me, the key to the job, and it took me a little time to appreciate this point, is to recognise the different constituencies of the School. The core constituency is the academic staff. The students are obviously important, as are the lay members and alumni. All these constituencies have to be accommodated within the debates that go on. It can be a demanding exercise. I am proud of the level of student representation which has been achieved within the School. That was certainly not the case in the 1960s when a rather paternalistic regime applied.

'As to individual issues, I think we have succeeded in achieving major governance reforms. This was a delicate process but we have transformed the governance whereby the constitutional structure of the School flows from the Council rather than from the Court of Governors under the old system. Members of the Council are directors of LSE, which is a company limited by guarantee. Thus the legal position is an accurate reflection of the governance structure we have adopted. This reform was achieved by consent, albeit over time, and I think is a major success story.

'Another thing I am proud of is the development of the LSE estate during my time. One of the tragedies of the School is that, over many years, at critical moments, it might have been possible to acquire freeholds and to create a proper campus rather than a collection of buildings nearby to each other. One of Tony Giddens' priorities was to focus on the estate and to improve the student experience. The pedestrianisation project with Westminster achieved the blocking off of Houghton Street and went a long way to creating more of a campus. In my day, cars passed through Houghton Street. That will never happen again. And the strategy is to continue this. We want to open up the estate and to continue to make LSE a more attractive student experience and

working environment with facilities such as cafeterias at ground floor level. It is difficult to believe that we have principal dining areas on the 4th and 5th floors of the Old Building serviced by two elevators. The estate story is very important but I think we are making good progress.

'The Princess Royal as the chancellor of the University of London opened the new library in 2001 and that occasion stands out as a particular memory. It was a fine project, brilliantly handled by everyone involved, especially the then School secretary, Christine Challis, and the librarian, Jean Sykes. The new Lord Foster designed library is a state of the art building and was achieved on time and to budget in an aggressive financial environment. We have to be an institution that pays for itself and develops itself on the national and international stage.

'We must continue to attract the best staff in order to attract the best students and we must have matching facilities. I am especially delighted about the new academic building on the corner of Lincoln's Inn Fields. It opens up LSE to a particularly attractive part of London and will dramatically improve the LSE experience for staff and students alike.'

So what is it about LSE that has made you such a staunch advocate?

'I think the School seeks to stick closely, even today, to what the founders had in mind: the ethos of the place is captured in the School motto *rerum cognoscere causas* – to understand the causes of things. LSE offers a strong intellectual tradition and it does so in the context of how the real world works at a practical level. Generations of students have entered their chosen jobs here and abroad, and have made a fabulous contribution. The School has been a brilliant production line of talent to the benefit of the world at large. I have been privileged to have been a small part of that and I think that many, if not most, LSE graduates would see it in the same way.' ■