

Breaking the Mould Beyond the Bench: Stonecliffe KC's Vision for the Bar

*The reflections in this article are drawn from my recent interview with Heidi Stonecliffe KC which can be found on my Spotify podcast *Law on Tour*.

I recently had the honour of interviewing Heidi Stonecliffe KC, engaging in a candid exchange that highlighted both the barriers she has broken and the core values she continues to uphold. Throughout our discourse, the theme of 'legacy' consistently emerged as we discussed her journey into the legal profession. It is not legacy in the narrow, individualistic sense, but her legacy as a collective. Stonecliffe KC's journey has reshaped the landscape of the Bar by creating opportunities for those who follow and expanding visibility at the Bar. Stonecliffe KC reminds us that entering the legal profession is not simply just a career, but a vocation of service, resilience, and responsibility.

In 2026, Heidi Stonecliffe KC will become the first employed barrister elected as Vice Chair of the Bar Council. This accomplishment builds on her distinction as the first woman of the Crown Prosecution Service to be appointed King's Council. Albeit historic and remarkable milestones, Stonecliffe KC illustrates that these achievements, whilst exceptional, *"should not be seen as the exception."* Stonecliffe KC's success represents not only personal triumphs but serves as a reminder on how far the boundaries can be pushed. *"It feels like an achievement that's bigger than me"* Stonecliffe KC reflects. *"When I applied for Silk, I knew that because I was doing it as a bit of an outlier from the employed Bar, getting Silk would be more than a personal appointment. It was an opportunity to set an example. It feels like it's a milestone for other people to sort of push those boundaries forward another step and so I'm really proud to be able to do that."*

From Humble Beginnings to the Bar

Stonecliffe KC's journey was rooted in modest beginnings. Raised in a working-class household, neither of her parents went to university. Her father left school at fourteen to work on the railways and her mother was a legal secretary. Stonecliffe KC was the first in her family to attend university, and financed her degree, Bar School and pupillage by working multiple jobs simultaneously. Guided by the grit instilled from Stonecliffe KC's parents, combined with her sense of responsibility to honour their sacrifices, Stonecliffe KC was determined not to give up despite setbacks.

The Call of Advocacy

Law was not Stonecliffe KC's first ambition. Initially drawn to veterinary science, Stonecliffe KC turned to law after challenges in her science studies and an encounter with *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The courage of Atticus Finch, advocating for justice despite impossible odds, resonated deeply. At a time when access to the Bar was limited, Stonecliffe KC recalls searching libraries for information on barristers and finding only images of older men in striped trousers. Her teachers were also sceptical of the belief that women could become barristers. That sense of invisibility, Stonecliffe KC notes, is why mentoring and outreach today are essential so that young people can see themselves reflected in the profession.

Turning to Stonecliffe KC as a renowned practitioner and Silk, Stonecliffe KC recalls a defining case which encapsulated her belief that advocacy entails speaking up for the voiceless. The case underpins a homicide trial where a man was accused of murdering his mother. Unfortunately, the mother lived in silence and there was no other family member to speak on the victim's behalf. Upon reflection, Stonecliffe KC *"remember[s] thinking we have to do justice for this woman. We have to*

give her her voice back” by shining a light on what happened at home. When the jury convicted, Stonecliffe KC did not celebrate in the traditional sense, but she recognised that justice had been served for someone who could no longer advocate for themselves.

Building Community Through Common Ground

Stonecliffe KC’s commitment towards advancing representation and visibility through advocacy is what drew her to Sikhs in Law. As a result of her friendship with Baldip Singh DDJ, Chair of Sikhs in Law, Stonecliffe KC recognised the parallels of their shared tenacity. Albeit different experiences, both had endured prejudice and were determined to transform their experiences into something positive for others. Stonecliffe KC speaks warmly of Sikhs in Law initiatives, from the Women’s Forum to the Junior Lawyers Division, the Advocacy Council and the Sir Mota Singh Moot. Stonecliffe KC fondly reminisces on making submissions to Sir Mota Singh for an application to bail at the beginning of her second six pupillage and reflects on his attentiveness. Stonecliffe KC celebrates that the Sikhs in Law initiatives provide multiple spaces for visibility and legal advancement within underrepresented groups whilst honouring Sikh history. To Stonecliffe KC, Sikhs in Law represents more than professional networking; it is a celebration of heritage. Ethnicity, therefore, is not framed as an obstacle at the Bar but a collaborative celebration.

Advancing the culture of Wellbeing

Alongside her dedication towards inclusive spaces at the Bar, Stonecliffe KC emphasises the importance of wellbeing. As Master of Wellbeing at Inner Temple, Stonecliffe KC reflects on a culture that once expected barristers to continue advocating in court regardless of illness or personal hardship. Stonecliffe KC recalls completing a trial with a kidney infection, convinced that she was well enough to persevere. However, Stonecliffe KC reveals that attitudes are now shifting, with leaders like Barbara Mills KC, previous Chair of the Bar Council, placing wellbeing as one of her three priorities. Stonecliffe KC stresses the importance of mental and physical wellbeing to ensure barristers represent their clients to the best of their ability. By speaking openly about her experiences with anxiety, Stonecliffe KC has contributed to creating a safe space for younger barristers to seek support out of strength and not weakness. This openness may also raise awareness on the challenges faced by female barristers with endometriosis or PCOS, highlighting the importance of wellbeing for all members. Under the tenure of Mills KC and Stonecliffe KC, it is understood that wellbeing at the Bar will be redefined as a priority and not a ‘snowflake generation’ issue.

Redefining the Employed Bar

Stonecliffe KC’s achievements have also helped redefine the perceptions of the employed Bar. Once dismissed as a fallback option for those who failed to secure tenancy, the employed practice is now increasingly a first choice. In the early years, Stonecliffe KC reflects on the dismissive attitudes and prejudice endured towards employed advocates. As perspectives shift towards greater recognition of the employed Bar, Stonecliffe KC’s career serves as an example of the diverse and enriching opportunities employed practice offers. While Stonecliffe KC acknowledges that gender remains a factor in progression at the Bar, there is now more accessibility towards stability when building a family and balancing ambition at the Bar. Stonecliffe KC actively encourages aspiring barristers to consider the employed Bar as a first choice because of the meaningful opportunities coupled with the security of a salary and pension. Transitioning beyond the chasm of the employed Bar and the self-employed Bar, Stonecliffe KC envisions we can collectively become *“one Bar”* as *“there is more that joins us together than divides us”*.

Advice to the Next Generation

To aspiring solicitors and barristers, Stonecliffe KC urges students not to give up. Stonecliffe KC assures us that past hurdles *“will become part of the brilliant future person you are going to become and will be part of what drives you on.”* She recalls the phone call from her pupil supervisor that she had not been taken on as a tenant. Looking back, Stonecliffe KC sees those challenges as defining moments that made her stronger, and ultimately, a more authentic advocate. To illustrate resilience, Stonecliffe KC uses the image of a kintsugi bowl to demonstrate the strengths in the cracks of adversity. In this Japanese tradition, the broken bowl is joined together with bits of gold to illustrate finding beauty in imperfection. For Stonecliffe KC, this image captures the essence of what a legal career often looks like; the rejections and disappointments illustrated within the cracks hold the bowl together, making it stronger and more valuable. Stonecliffe KC reinforces the notion that setbacks are a part of your story, but they should not end your journey in the profession. It is okay not to take a linear path.

Stonecliffe KC encourages students to focus on the quality rather than the quantity of experiences, to reflect on what they have learned from each opportunity, and above all to be authentic. Pretending to fit a mould is unconvincing as Stonecliffe KC argues that the most compelling advocates are those who embrace their individuality.

A Legacy of Possibility

Interviewing Heidi Stonecliffe KC was a privilege. She speaks with rare candour and genuine humility, alongside a sincere commitment to serve and empower others. Her story is not only one of professional firsts, but in the tracks she has laid down for others to follow: women at the Bar, employed barristers, and all who once thought the profession was not for them. Stonecliffe KC has broken barriers not simply for herself, but for those who might have once looked at the Bar and thought, ‘that doesn’t look like me.’ Stonecliffe KC reminds us that resilience, sincerity, and advocacy are what truly define success in the law. Her commitment to wellbeing serves as a testament to reminding the profession that wellbeing at the Bar is a collective responsibility. Stonecliffe KC’s contribution is not measured in titles, but in the lives she has inspired and the doors she has opened for others. Stonecliffe KC’s legacy is one of possibility, rooted in authenticity, perseverance and courage, and it will continue to shape the future of the Bar for years to come.