

Sally Penni:

Hello and welcome to Talking Law, I'm Dr Sally Penni, MBE, a barrister at Kenworthy's Chambers in Manchester, the Joint Vice Chair of Association of Women Barristers and founder of Women in the Law UK.

On this podcast, you'll hear leading barristers, judges, solicitors, managing partners and more, talk about their lives and careers within the legal sector.

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Before you meet today's guest, a reminder that tickets for the Women in the Law UK Annual Dinner and Conference in Manchester this November are on sale now. Please visit womeninthelawuk.com for more details.

I'd also love you to watch my recent Ted Talk, where I discuss whether love can conquer hate. Please head to Ted.com and search for Sally Penni.

Today I'm Talking Law with former President of the Law Society of England and Wales, Christina Blacklaws.

Christina qualified as a solicitor in 1991. She held, and continues to hold, a number of very high profile positions across the legal sector - and beyond - and now runs her own consultancy business providing strategic advice particularly in the areas of transformational change, technological developments and diversity and inclusion.

Christina revealed to me that her interest in Law began at a very early age.

Christina Blacklaws:

I'm going to sound a bit precocious now, I think because it started really early on, you know, when I was a young teenager, I sort of realized the importance of the law and how it could be weaponized for good and, and for ill. So how it could be used to defend the rights of, of the vulnerable enforce rights for everyone, but be misused and, and ruin people's lives if wasn't used appropriately. So that really interested me, I was quite a political <laugh> young woman and, and so that sent me on a trajectory really. So I went to went to Oxford, read jurisprudence there and briefly thought about becoming working in the criminal justice system. But very quickly went into children and family law because that, I think that really spoke to me, it's not really vocational. So the early part of my career, I was a children's rights lawyer.

Sally Penni:

Wow.

Christina Blacklaws:

Yeah. Yeah. So, you know, when children are neglected or abused and the local authority gets involved, they have their own lawyer and it's that person's job to work with independent social workers and really make sure that the voice of that child is heard in the proceedings. So it was a wonderful time. It was

highly vocational. And you know, I really felt like I was making a difference for some of some of the most vulnerable people in our society. So that was my early stages of, of my career.

Sally Penni:

Yeah absolutely. Well, maybe we should fast forward a little bit. So that was the very early stages. Tell me what you are doing now and how did you get to where you are now?

Christina Blacklaws:

Now I, I'm doing a whole range of, of different things. But my route to it, I think was probably because right from the early stages of my career I thought of myself as an entrepreneur. So I built my own law firm. And I also built a virtual law firm using the, the technology that was available at the time in the early 2000s. I set up the the very first alternative business structure within the, The Co-operative Group. Yes. And I think I was one of the first people to glory in the title of a Director of Innovation in the last law firm!

Sally Penni:

I know I saw it when I was doing my research. I was like, 'wow'.

Christina Blacklaws:

So so, you know, throughout my career, I guess I've been a campaigner. I, you know, and I've also been an entrepreneur, a businesswoman and an innovator, and those threads continue in, in my current career.

So I have what is loosely termed a 'portfolio' career. So I'm a non-executive director with three large law firms. And I also provide independent consultancy for a number of other law firms, particularly around innovation and the future of legal services and diversity equity and inclusion. And that involves a lot of speaking and conferences on, particularly on those subjects. But I also do a load of other stuff. So I chair a couple of government bodies in the technology and law space, one for Ministry of Justice and another one for Bays. I'm head of faculty of the legal technology and innovation Institute, which is a global organization, really focused on technology and its use in the law. And then I do a lot for the International Bar Association and particularly around rule of law and international human rights. And last, but by no means least I, I sit on the QC selection panel. So I have the great honor of also selecting QCs.

Sally Penni:

Brilliant. Well, I'll come to that in a moment, but you do also, you are also on the editorial board of legal women magazine, which was established by Coral Hill, a mutual friend. So you forgot that in addition,

Christina Blacklaws:

I know I'm so sorry. I, I didn't wanna bore your listeners reeling off a hundred things that I do, but you are absolutely right. And that's something that you know, a complete shared passion of ours. And I continue to do a lot in the, in the gender agenda if you like. So I sit on the women lawyers committee of the IBA, for example, the international women and law work through the law society and indeed through the wonderful publication from our, our mutual and great good friends, Coral Hill.

Sally Penni:

Well, it, it's not boring because what that list tells me is actually what a law degree and indeed what the law can provide by way of a career. And certainly, you know, many Women in the Law members, you know, there's 22,000 of them know that I say this consistently about portfolio careers and their importance and their relevance, really, you know, the ability to kind of enjoy a bit more and use those transferable skills.

So it's not boring. It's really, really interesting because one of the things that arises from that is when you became president of the law society. Now, before I ask you a bit about some of the work that you did there, the pledge, the round tables and women in law, where did you get the confidence from to go for it? Because I know from your pre you know, your successor Stephanie Boyce, it took her four attempts. And so I just wonder for you, where did you get the confidence because that's one of the issues for women, isn't it putting ourselves forward?

Christina Blacklaws:

Absolutely. And it's something that I am in exactly the same position as, as any other woman in that you know, I, I often suffer from imposter syndrome or a lack of confidence when others, you know, have confidence in me. And you know, and I see that with, with friends and colleagues and other women in the law, and it is, you know, I feel frustrated <laugh> not, not at us because actually we are like that because we've been nurtured in that way. Society has, has formed us in that way, but at society that has, you know, led all these amazing women, not to feel their power and their confidence and their ability to use that. So it is something that you know, as an entrepreneur and leading businesses and indeed in my, my roles in the law society and other representative organizations where I, where I took a leadership role and, you know, and enjoyed being able to be part of a team that was making a real positive difference. And it's a bit like a drug. I think that's, that's the thing, you know, when you, when you have that, that sense of shifting the needle, making a difference, you know, making the world a little bit of a better place. I, for one, I can't get enough of it and that's, that's why I wanted to, to put myself forward. And that was really my focus. So particularly around underrepresented and underestimated people and the program of the women in leadership laws was, was part part of that.

Sally Penni:

Well, it interesting because when you were president you, your, your focus was women in leadership, but in law and the issues affecting women, and of course you got male allies to also conduct and be part of the round tables, which formed the report, but you were also heavily involved in the first Hundred Years Project, a brilliant project by Dina Smith who've started the first hundred years. I remember when it started, we all bought the toilet rolls.

Christina Blacklaws:

<Laugh>,

Sally Penni:

I think I've still got mine somewhere top of a brief somewhere in here. And, and, but one of the other aspects of your passion was for tech. Just tell me a little about that, especially in the context of innovation of technology in, in law.

Christina Blacklaws:

Well, I first learned to code in the, in the early two thousands, and I could really see the potential then of shifting what was a very bespoke, but quite cottage industry in law into, into something where, you

know, we were just much more accessible for people who perceived that they couldn't afford a lawyer. And as I said before, you use that to, to build a virtual law firm where people up and down the country working through our systems within our, our regulatory framework, of course, <laugh> yes, but really sort of pushing the boundaries and, and indeed 95% of those people were women because it enabled them to do the work that they loved without all of the admin and bureaucracy that went with that. And of course now we've got Gonna Cook and Keystone and, and other lawyers on demand other, you know, massive players doing that. But I think that was one of the first <laugh>.

Sally Penni:

Yeah. Oh no, too. Totally. You've got that badge <laugh>.

Christina Blacklaws:

And, and then of course, when I joined the Co-op to set up the ABS, then again, we used the technology that we had there to design develop and deliver what were modular, fixed-fee services, very reasonably priced, and were aimed at ordinary people so that they could you know, the services that they needed in the way that was going to work for them. So, so it's something that I really passionately believed in, and I believe that it could be good for our professions as well. I don't think it, we leave lawyers behind. I think it just means that lawyers, instead of doing some rather tedious administrative work could actually do the stuff for which we are trained, you know, and the more interesting, and the more demanding stuff, because the more complicated the world becomes, the more you do need lawyers to help sort it out.

Christina Blacklaws:

When I was president, we, we did a number of things. We set up with Barclay's Eagle Labs, the very first legal only legally focused incubators for startups and scale up to develop their law tech ideas. We worked with the government to set up an innovation fund. And part of that was used to set up Law Tech UK, which is a, that I, I continue to chair actually which looks at trying to ensure that we've got the right legislative and regulatory structure. So Sir Geoffrey Vos who sits on the panel has been an enormous amount of work around smarter legal contracts around blockchain and the, and you know, how this all fits into our legal system. But also to, to support the great ideas that have been generated in the UK around technology and how that is utilized for, for business and for small business and for individuals and how we can export that globally.

Christina Blacklaws:

And then the final, big piece that we did was a commission which I was able to chair, and that was A- it was great, good fun. Because we, we held sort of like select committee sessions where we, we had witnesses and took evidence. But B- I think we came up with some, some really important advice to government, which was framed around the criminal justice system and the use of artificial intelligence or algorithms in the criminal justice system and you know, the pros and cons of that and the dangers of not getting that right. And, and of course in the criminal justice system if you get these things wrong, the consequences can be appalling for the individuals involved.

Sally Penni:

Yeah. Well, absolutely. I practice in, in crime. It's a really, you

Christina Blacklaws:

Know, you know, better than anybody.

Sally Penni:

Yes. Well, interesting.

Well, Christina, I'd like to just move away a little bit and just ask you this though, I've been very concerned about COVID and its impact on women and many the profession and the availability of training contracts albeit SQEs are in now for all those coming up, but equally at the bar the opportunities are, are, are becoming far and less. And so my question is really about what advice you might have for aspiring lawyers. And then, then I'll move on to perhaps established lawyers about really progression, but for those who want to enter the profession, any tips or advice?

Christina Blacklaws:

One thing I would say is you've got to be really courageous. You know, this is, this is not a career for the faint hearted. I think you've got to really believe in yourself and believe in what you're doing. You've got to really have purpose and understand your, your, your why. And then I would add to that, that it's really important to embrace change. When I entered the profession, it was highly traditional. You know, I, you would enter the profession, do 30 years at a, at a law firm and, you know, retire with a nice pension. And you might have been in the same office for that entire period of time. That is no longer the shape of the current shape of the law, let alone what the future will bring.

And, you know, I think to be successful in this career, you got to be excited about those changes, not hark back to, to how the law was because I really believe that's where the magic is going to happen. That's where actually, you know, the law is going to blossom as, as a career. I think, you know, it is tough, so you need to look to the positive in, in everything. So I always ask myself, as, you know, if I've had a knock back, if I've had a challenge, what can I learn from this experience? You know, how can that, I make me better out of this? And I think particularly for, for women and for people with protected characteristics and those who are, you have been underestimated for a very, very long time. So it, it includes sort of social inclusion issues, There. You have got to be really ambitious for yourself.

One of the things that our research around the women in leadership and law program showed that, you know, there is such a chronic, I would say systemic lack of ambition for women and people with protected characteristics. So, you know, others may not be as ambitious for you as they are for other people. So you've gotta have that drive. And part of that is to be really intentional, to have a very clear plan. Now you've gotta be agile as well. You know, you can't sort stick rigidly to step-by-step planning, but, you know, to, to really think about what you want to do and how you're going to get there. And it's, it's remarkable how many people don't actually have a have a, that sort of plan in their lives. And if you do, it just gives you that framework which I think will, is really supportive at early stages of career.

Sally Penni:

Fantastic advice. I suppose, a caveat I would say is, you know, when women become ambitious, then they're described as being too pushy or, you know, the language seems to change, doesn't it? You know, if you had to court and said, yes, I've got a strategic plan here. I'd like to be a silk by 50 and this and this and this, and I'm looking for cases that would get me there. You know, people would probably laugh, but I think the point you make is a valid one, isn't it, to have some sort of a plan so that you can then be strategic about it because Lady Hale said the same thing that we need to be strategic. And I think you were present where she said it, it may even have been at her valedictory at a Supreme court at which you spoke.

I think many people watched on YouTube, but, you know, your speech was spot on. And of course, you know, I digress a little bit, but there is now only one woman in the Supreme court. Again. The Lady Rose, who's a bencher like myself, am I in? And so we have to keep doing the work don't we? And if that's strategizing amongst that advice, then super!

Christina, can I ask you very quickly then... what, what about women and the progression of women? What advice would you have for, for example, the women that I mentor who are either 12 years call at the bar, or they're about 10 years admission solicitors, and they're thinking where to go with their careers, those women.

And then there are the women who are about 15 years experience or call and then looking for a bit of oomph, have you got any advice? I know, do you know what I mean? The kind who're sitting there thinking 'gosh is this it'? You know, they've often had children they're settling back in any kind of careers advice, I suppose, with those perhaps were a little bit more established.

Christina Blacklaws:

And I think for those women, you know, the research evidence is that women's career in law tends to sort of start to fall off the cliff around six to eight PQE in, in solicitor terms. Yeah. So for those who have got a bit further down the line, you know, you have already been through the ringer, I would say probably to continue to, just to be there <laugh>, you know, to have to, to continue to be standing in your, in your professional shoes, I think. And so I think it's really important to, to recognize that as we were saying before, women often don't recognise their own power and, and where they have got to and why they have got to, and the skills and the experience and the resilience that has got them to that place in their career.

So when I'm mentoring women in, in that sort of, part of their career, it's all about confidence. It's all about, you know, building that now, how do you do that? And that might be the confidence to, you know, to go out of the comfort zone to take that next big leap professionally. And in, in terms of the solicitors profession, I think you've really got to do two things. You've gotta be your own advocate. And of course, as you were saying before, you know, maybe it isn't right in every circumstance to get out your, you know, 50 page <laugh> strategic plan and show it to everyone. But if you've got it in your head, <laugh>, then that's where it needs... that's where it needs to be. But, you know, you, you need to be your own effective advocate and you also need I think to, to sort of build your board because we are, I'll explain that <laugh> because we are socialised as you said, said to, you know, to not be bossy, to be compliant to you know, to be submissive actually in, in some significant senses, it's really important that we have people around us to support us not to be like that.

So I, that's why I call it a board because if you are surround yourself by four or five people who have different skills and experience you know, and diversity is key in this <laugh> to you, but who are absolutely have your back and want you to succeed then those are the people to whom you should go. If you are feeling that you are, you know, that that power within you is starting to ebb, you're losing that confidence. You are, you are uncertain about your yourself and, and your future. And the final thing I would say, and it's, it's still on the same theme about recognizing your own power is to use that for good. So to ensure that, you know, when you recognize that say 12, 15 years, this is where I'm at, this is where I want to go.

This is the help I need, but what out can I do for other women or other people, you know, to be able to help them to get to this position and to, you know, support them further, because of all my experiences of what I, you know, what I know hasn't worked and what has worked. And I, and I think that is incredibly important. And I have always found in mentoring relationships that I have gained an enormous amount of insight and wisdom about myself and about other people in, in doing that. So, so I

think giving back and using your position is something that's really, really important to do and also personally rewarding.

Sally Penni:

Yes. Well, I agree with that. And I tell you, you know, with only six black female QCs in the country, and very few on the bench, you know, those of us who are in leadership positions of any sort, really, I certainly try. And I know so many women are trying.

Christina, you look fantastic. So I want ask you about wellbeing. I remember seeing you when you were president and you had on a suit and then you had knee boots on I'm thinking, 'crikey, that lady has taken care of herself for an evening event in the winter'.

Any tips cause you know, the truth is I'm jesting, but you know, we, I work long hours, I've got boxes all around me here or briefs and, you know, complicated cases, solicitors firms, they're working long hours with client demands and so on. And given the innovations that you've talked about and developed. So I just wonder if you could share some, I don't know, tips for this or how you managed to look after your wellbeing and wellness.

Christina Blacklaws:

I'm glad this is a podcast cause I'm flushing.

Sally Penni:

Oh yeah. Oh right. You were gonna say I'm pajama or some of thing <laugh>

Christina Blacklaws:

But yes. I have embraced the grade, so <laugh>, that's part of it is, you know, and part of it is about just being able to be authentic, and that's just not me, that's everybody, you know, and all the research shows that if, if you can be who you are you, you you're gonna be happier.

You're always gonna be happier things that make me personally happy. I'm not a total exercise nut, but I do make sure that every single day I get out into nature, that's the sort of, you know, if I don't do that, I start to get a bit jittery <laugh> that could be, you know, could be a park, could be anything, but, you know, I, I just need to get out and you know, literally smell the flowers.

And I, yeah, I do have downtime. I do make sure that I have that but like all busy women, it's, it's pretty limited. So what I try to do is to make sure I spend as much time as I can with the people that I love. <Laugh> that's that, that is you know, that, that to me is such... so energizing and and is just so, so important in, in my life. And then there's another element, which I think is, is about being of service. Again, I, you know, I personally, I just find that incredibly, incredibly rewarding and you know, you, you know that for yourself as well, because you do so much for, for others.

Sally Penni:

Yes. well, thank you. They're really helpful. Now what about reading? And I want to talk about legal characters. Are you an Ally McBeal or an LA Law? I'm a Rupole of the Bailey myself in terms of reading the books and kind of legal, I wouldn't say role models, but I, I just wondered, do you have a favorite book? And if you do, what is it and, and why? We have a book club here, women in the law.

And I wondered if you had a favorite fictional, legal character somewhere?

Christina Blacklaws:

<Laugh> Well, I don't get time to watch much tele, but I think my, my favorite book actually isn't anything to do with the law. And it's a children's book. I think some of the best books that ever been written have been for children. But it does have a very for, for me - in a sense, this is why I went into the law because it, it, it really aligned with my purpose and my moral code - and I think that this, this little book, which I would recommend to everybody I first read it, I think when I was a maybe 10. And, and I, I reread it often because it it's just so lovely. And it's The Little Prince by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. And the, for me, the sort of the very essence of it is, is when the, the, the little prince is talking to his friend, the rose, and, and he says that it's, it's only with the heart that you can see, rightly what's essential is invisible to the eye.

And you know, that, that struck a chord with, with 10 year old Christina, and I've kept it ever since, you know, the, the, yes, what's really important in, in life. And I think that that is something that, to bring it back to law, I think that is that we are often very purpose -driven as, as, as lawyers, you know, it is, it's what is really important to us. So that, that, that would be my book. But in terms of I was trying to think about this and obviously Ally McBeal was very much in play when I, when, when when I was a young young woman. But I think probably I'm going to say Erin Brockovich.

Sally Penni:

Brilliant choice.

Christina Blacklaws:

Yeah, it's a bit of a cheat though, because she wasn't a qualified lawyer and she is actually a real person <laugh>, but Julia Roberts did play her in, in a fabulous film. And for those of you who don't know, she's, she's like a legal assistant working with a lawyer, and she's trying to get justice against a, a major US energy corporation that's contaminating water in, in her hometown people cancer. She uses her the law to fight for those people who are downtrodden disempowered. And I just I, I thought she was a wonderful character, so, so yeah, she's, she's my favorite.

Sally Penni:

Oh, brilliant. Brilliant. Now, Christina we're coming to the end, I suppose I could talk to you all day to be quite honest, and your tenure at the law society, I feel, you know, has really left the legacy, not just because of the women in law pledge and the reports you did and indeed the technology, but it then followed is Stephanie Boyce, as I already alluded to. And then the next president who will be coming in October 22 will be Lubner. And so actually our solicitor colleagues have had leadership from three brilliant women. And as if that wasn't enough, you've recently been given an international award for your leadership.

Can you just tell me a little about that because I know I'm going to pronounce it wrong because it was delivered to you personally.

Christina Blacklaws:

Yes, yes. It's the Justica. So it's it's an award which is run by our colleagues in Europe who are based in Austria and one of the founders, because we couldn't, because of COVID have a proper award ceremony - she brought the award all the way over here for me. So I was it was very, very kind of her. And it was it was a, an award a lifetime achievement award actually for international work in relation to women in the law. So I was I was absolutely delighted, really chuffed to, to have got it. It's sitting in front of me now. <Laugh>

Sally Penni:

Wonderful, well, Christina, I'm so pleased about that. Well, can I ask you, as we conclude, where do you see the future for women and, and what's next for you? Is it to continue doing what you're doing? Or have you got a grand plan on your 50 K strategic plan? Where do you see women going? Cuz I am concerned that actually the pandemic has set women back and indeed your party parliamentary group have been doing lots of research in this area. Where do you see the progression of women going and what's next for you, Christina Blacklaws?

Christina Blacklaws:

I share your concerns, Sally. I think it is really worrying where women are in the profession, now. I think that we have gone backwards in relation to the pandemic and I am worried that we won't continue to make progress. There's no room for complacency. We all have to put our shoulders to the wheel to make sure that women, people who protected characteristics, people who have been underrepresented and underestimated for so long have that opportunity to just be on a level playing field. That's all that is required actually, because talent is equally spread. And so we must, we must keep progressing that and it will take people like you and me and people who are listening to ensure that we continue to push this Boulder up the hill because although to me, it's, it's plainly obvious that this is best for business. Best for profitability. It is unfortunately because we have systemic bias in our society, which feeds through, into the way that businesses are managed and run, we still need to fight very hard to ensure that women, people with protected characteristics, and others have that equal chance in, in our profession and indeed in our world.

So rally cry to, to your, to your thousands and thousands of listeners. <Laugh>, let's do this together. And as far as I'm concerned, you know, I am incredibly happy with my portfolio career. In fact, if, if listeners wanna contact me, ask me, you know, how to do it, I'm very happy to have those conversations because I feel passionately that it for me it's the right balance of the intellectual stimulation, the reward for, for doing some good in this world and not knocking myself out constantly, which I know is such a recurring problem and leads to so much mental ill health in our professions.

Christina Blacklaws:

So you know, I am very happy doing what I'm doing. And I look to do more of it. You know, I look to engage more with the profession, both domestically and internationally around these issues about which I'm completely passionate. So innovation in the future of legal services and how we can make this work for, for everybody. And, and particularly how we can make sure that our profession is as inclusive and supportive as it possibly can be. So, so those are things that are gonna keep me busy, I think, for, for the next the next while Sally.

Sally Penni:

A big thank you to Christina Blacklaws, for Talking Law with me, Dr Sally Penni MBE.

And thanks again to Salford Business Law Group. Find out more about their unique law courses at Salford.ac.uk

If you would like to support Talking Law, then please get in touch. You can find me on twitter @sallypenni1 or search for Sally Penni or Women in The Law UK on LinkedIn or Instagram.

Do make sure you catch up with previous episodes of Talking Law where you can hear my interviews with guests such as former Superintendent with the Metropolitan Police, Leroy Logan and international barrister Gerard McDermott.

Before I go, just a reminder to get your tickets for the Women In The Law UK annual dinner and watch my Ted Talk at [Ted.com](https://www.ted.com)

Thanks to our production team, Sam Walker and Michael Blades at What Goes On Media.
I'm Dr Sally Penni MBE, Bye for now.