

231211 - Talking Law - Victoria Prentis HB Build

[00:00:00] **Sally:** Hello and welcome to Talking Law, the podcast where you can hear barristers, judges, solicitors, managing partners and those working in the law talk about their careers and lives in law. I'm Dr. Sally Penny MBE. I'm a barrister practicing from Kenworthy's Chambers in Manchester and I'm also the founder of Women in the Law UK.

[00:00:25] **Sally:** I'm delighted to be interviewing on this episode, the Right Honourable Victoria Prentice. [00:00:30] Who has served as the Attorney General for England and Wales since 2022. She's also a government minister and the MP member of parliament for Bambury near Oxford. The Attorney General is a chief legal advisor to the government, which means Victoria cannot sadly comment on the cases that she works on.

[00:00:49] **Sally:** For example, the Rwanda asylum bill. So in this episode We discussed her day to day role and what that entails. You'll also [00:01:00] hear about how the crossover in Victoria's career between law and politics came about. I interviewed Victoria in the stunning Houses of Parliament. And she explained to me a career in law wasn't the obvious route for her.

[00:01:17] **Victoria:** So I don't have any lawyers in the family. My first love was, and to a certain extent remains, English literature. I really love reading. And for my first degree at university, I [00:01:30] read English literature with some medieval languages thrown in. And increasingly, I thought about an academic career, but increasingly as I went on with my studies, I realized that I liked practical things and I liked helping people with their problems.

[00:01:46] **Victoria:** And I realized that law would be an outlet for both doing something that was quite challenging academically with very, very practical solutions to problems. Yeah. So it seemed to fit the bill for me. I didn't know all that much about it, [00:02:00] if I was honest. I had romantic notions about criminal defense and read lots of books about that, but that wasn't really what I wanted to do.

[00:02:09] **Victoria:** I wanted to help people solve their specific problems.

[00:02:11] **Sally:** Yes. Interesting. And given you didn't know anybody in law, you know, mum or dad or whatever, like I didn't know anybody. How did you

navigate the training and then progressing? Because you've been a government lawyer all your life.

[00:02:25] **Victoria:** Nearly all the way through.

[00:02:26] **Victoria:** So I, I realised that I hadn't done law for my first
[00:02:30] degree and I found out that if you went to a few universities, a full law degree in two years. And that, I think I knew even then that I would be interested in politics and international law. I think I knew that that, that would always excite me. And I was slightly worried that in the short conversion courses that Uh, you wouldn't be able to go in depth into those subjects.

[00:02:56] **Victoria:** So I thought, oh, well I can just do a full law degree. I'll do it a bit faster [00:03:00] because I've already done a degree and I know what I'm doing at university. So, um, I applied to dining college Cambridge, which is a great law college. They were kind enough to give me a scholarship so it didn't cost any more to do an extra year.

[00:03:13] **Victoria:** And I was tutored by the very great John Hopkins in constitutional law. Yes, at various. very great people, including Christopher Greenwood, in international law. And I realised very quickly on in my law degree that these were really [00:03:30] areas of interest

[00:03:31] **Sally:** for me. Yes, interesting. Now, in a moment I'm going to ask you to tell us what your average day looks like as the Attorney General.

[00:03:38] **Sally:** But for most people, and certainly I've been at the bar for 23 years, my experience of the Attorney General has been when there's a reference where I've been prosecuting, and there's a lenient sentence of what one might consider to be unduly lenient sentence. So then you review that sentence, and then it goes off to the Attorney General's office, and usually you don't see it again, because it [00:04:00] goes to Treasury Council, who are based in London, and then the case goes forward, and occasionally you, the original lawyer, might be led by Cheney Council.

[00:04:08] **Sally:** So that's kind of often people's experience of the Attorney General. those of us who are at the bar. But what does your average day look like?

[00:04:17] **Victoria:** So I'm very much the in house lawyer for the government. So I behave as any in house lawyer does. I get asked [00:04:30] questions, specific legal questions to do with legislation.

[00:04:33] **Victoria:** And also to do with litigation that the government's involved in. I attend every cabinet meeting. I try not to talk unless there's a legal issue. And when there is a legal issue, I put up my hand and I expect to be listened to, frankly. It's very much like being a lawyer on a company board or in any form of in house.

[00:04:55] **Victoria:** role where you are there exclusively to give legal advice to that [00:05:00] organization. It's a little bit of compliance thrown into, which is fine. And during the course of my days, I attend cabinet. I attend lots of other meetings individually with ministers who are working through a new policy area or a particularly problematic piece of litigation.

[00:05:18] **Victoria:** I attend meetings of groups of ministers who might want to test new ideas against. a lawyer. Yes. I sit in the chamber [00:05:30] and occasionally speak or answer questions on, on legal matters. Like all lawyers, you'll understand this, I can't speak about my cases and I'm not even really meant to speak about whether I'm advising in a case.

[00:05:43] **Victoria:** You might. think it's often very obvious that the attorney's involved in high profile cases, but I'm not really supposed to even give that away because my client confidentiality to the government is very strong.

[00:05:55] **Sally:** Well, that, that gets rid of about 10 questions for that to get done. And,

[00:05:58] **Victoria:** and, and there's lots of other things.

[00:05:59] **Victoria:** I [00:06:00] mean, there's an international role. I meet other AGs from around the world and justice ministers. We have a, um, quite a lot of work sadly at the moment, looking at war crimes in Ukraine and the invasion there. Yes, and there's a, there's a sort of wider being a leader of the bar role and making sure that we, you know, as, as leaders of the bar within, within government, make sure that the, the two sides of that [00:06:30] relationship work

[00:06:31] **Sally:** well together.

[00:06:32] **Sally:** I want to ask you about politics. Now, this is not a political podcast. I think I've only had. Two politicians, if I can say that. David Lammy is about the, the, uh, the, uh, the person. And he's a lawyer. And he's a lawyer. So that's the only reason he was invited on, uh, not to talk about politics in any shape or form.

[00:06:49] **Sally:** But I wanted to ask you about making the crossover because you're also, um, the member of parliament for Banbury Oxford. And so the cross, the crossover, if you like, [00:07:00] from law to politics or in addition to, uh, law and politics. How did that come about? When did you think, I want to go further? Well, it was particularly

[00:07:08] **Victoria:** difficult because I was a civil servant lawyer.

[00:07:10] **Victoria:** So I'd done 17 years in the Treasury Solicitor's Department doing litigation. I was very much enjoying being a civil service lawyer. I'd gone, um, from being a very junior lawyer. to a very senior lawyer in charge of a very large litigation team. Team, yeah. And doing, frankly, [00:07:30] the most exciting cases there were to do.

[00:07:33] **Victoria:** And I was able, during that time, to job share some of it. I did have children, but increasingly both myself and my job share found that we were using our days when we weren't working to run quite substantial charities. Yes. She ran, um, on a volunteer basis maternity services for London and and was very involved in that.

[00:07:57] **Victoria:** I was very involved in setting up [00:08:00] and ultimately chairing the fund at our children's hospital in Oxfordshire. Yes. And also various other local campaigns to Banbury. And it seemed to me that I was getting very, very involved in community life and I loved that. And our old MP retired, and I'd always said, Oh, I couldn't even think about politics until my youngest daughter started secondary school.

[00:08:24] **Victoria:** And he retired on the day my youngest daughter started secondary

[00:08:28] **Sally:** school. That was [00:08:30] timely.

[00:08:30] **Victoria:** This all seemed, I have no idea if you knew, this all seemed to sort of fall into place. I was born in Banbury, I love Banbury, it's a very important part of my life. Me. Yes. And I just thought, Oh, I could represent my community.

[00:08:43] **Victoria:** It was also at the same time that David Cameron recently back as Foreign Secretary was very much looking for women in politics, and he'd said that quite openly. There was clearly a route in for some punchy women, and I thought, Oh, there aren't really any excuses

[00:08:59] **Sally:** [00:09:00] left. Fantastic. And you got, you know, you got in and you progressed brilliantly.

[00:09:05] **Sally:** And just on the point about women, your department, uh, you know, I set up an organization called Women in the Law UK. It's about empowering and inspiring, supporting and connecting women in addition to my day job. And I noticed looking at your department, you've got a considerable amount of women. Oh yeah.

[00:09:21] **Sally:** But actually in, in leadership roles, which is what I'm really interested

[00:09:26] **Victoria:** in. So the government legal service. In which I work for [00:09:30] almost all of my career. It's brilliant at diversity generally, actually, if I'm honest. And that's one of the things I really love about it. It very much takes you at face value.

[00:09:42] **Victoria:** Yes. If you do the work. and you're enthusiastic about doing the work for government, you're passionate to do a good job and to play by the rules, and whichever part of government excites you, then you, you, you can do, be a litigator, you can be an advisory lawyer, you can, you can do a huge range of jobs within it.

[00:09:59] **Victoria:** It's [00:10:00] very much a system where you can be yourself at the same time. So that means We have women, we promote women, we have people of all ethnicities, we have people who choose to work part time because they're looking after children but we also have people who work part time because they're doing academic degrees or they're looking after older people or we, we don't ask questions, we try to be kind and caring and we might well ask questions on that basis but I'm [00:10:30] really impressed by the way that we are genuinely enthusiastic about different choices.

[00:10:35] **Sally:** Absolutely. And, uh, and the reason I'm interested is that it means that actually it's better for the retention and nutrition of women. Oh,

[00:10:40] **Victoria:** it's much better because you're working with a bunch of people who are motivated by a little bit more than money. Exactly. And they're passionate about public service and the work that they do.

[00:10:50] **Victoria:** And they're a really diverse. and enthusiastic group of people, and they're great.

[00:10:56] **Sally:** And they wouldn't leave because, uh, you know, in the private sector, [00:11:00] when things don't quite meet one's requirements, it means we lose quite talented people. So it provides another avenue, not just for women.

[00:11:07] **Victoria:** I mean, I don't want to paint too rosy a picture.

[00:11:09] **Victoria:** I was very much, well, I was the first person to work part time in litigation.

[00:11:13] **Sally:** I was just coming to that. So this

[00:11:15] **Victoria:** is. You know, I'm feeling like an old lady now, but this is relatively new. Um, but it has genuinely been enthusiastically embraced. And that means we have a bunch of people now running the [00:11:30] organisation who are quite different from how it would have been 20

[00:11:35] **Sally:** ago, yes.

[00:11:36] **Sally:** Um, this year, uh, I met you all via Briefly. at Lincoln's Inn where you gave, um, the lead speech, um, and, uh, Lincoln's Inn, it was the Inns of Court, um, Women's Alliance.

[00:11:48] **Victoria:** I remember it was an amazing occasion. It is so rare that you look out at an audience. And you see [00:12:00] a huge, well it was a garden full, wasn't it?

[00:12:02] **Victoria:** It wasn't even a room, there were hundreds of very clever, very capable women barristers wearing black. Yes, yes,

[00:12:12] **Sally:** I was there, I was one of them.

[00:12:14] **Victoria:** I don't think I've ever seen that many women barristers before. And I think, um, many of us there actually found it quite an affirming experience. The other thing I've done this year that was that you could hear the glass ceiling shattering was Sue Carr swearing [00:12:30] in as Lady Chief.

[00:12:31] **Victoria:** Absolutely, absolutely. And that again, um, was

[00:12:33] **Sally:** exciting. Yes, yeah. And it is an exciting time, isn't it? I think. Um, so at that garden party though, I was really quite impressed at how many women of colour, you know, black and ethnic minority women there were. And

yet those who are, you know, ten years, less core than me, for example, thought there wasn't enough.

[00:12:51] **Sally:** And so it's quite interesting to think where we think there's change. Actually, those who are younger, I don't want to call them millennials because they weren't [00:13:00] quite, often talk about the pace of change. Do you think we're now in a momentum? Well, I hope

[00:13:05] **Victoria:** we are. I mean, definitely the government legal services has got some things right.

[00:13:10] **Victoria:** And I met some fabulous Crown prosecutors yesterday. Again, a very diverse. group of people. Yes. Really impressive. Senior women, senior people from all different communities and that's really adding to the quality of the work that they do and the quality of the advice that they give. So [00:13:30] yeah, there are some bits that are absolutely going very well.

[00:13:33] **Victoria:** I think we all have to accept that the senior judiciary is not where we would want it to be yet. Yes, I'm afraid. quite a lot of work to do. And I think we can talk frankly about the fact that women often start at the bar, at the independent bar, but then there is still quite significant attrition. And those first applications for judicial posts are often the time when you're really up to your neck in small children.[00:14:00]

[00:14:00] **Victoria:** And it's really, really hard work. And we, we've just got to talk frankly about the problems in order to find solutions for them.

[00:14:08] **Sally:** Absolutely. But having said that, they're still in the High Court and the Court of Appeal. No full time. black women judges. Is that right? And, uh, of course we're delighted because in the Supreme Court, um, we've got another woman.

[00:14:22] **Sally:** Yes. Uh, you know, Lady Justice Ingrid Simbler. So, so, I, I like to think about optimism. Yeah. [00:14:30] At the progression. But you're absolutely right about being realistic about the progress that's, that's being made. But

[00:14:36] **Victoria:** we, we are getting there. And our profession, we're very fortunate, is a meritocracy. And bright people should join, and they will get on, and we will do everything we can to make sure they

[00:14:48] **Sally:** do.

[00:14:48] **Sally:** Yes, you're right, but of course, in line though, they do need to see role models going forward. Um, can I ask you about I usually ask what's your [00:15:00] favourite case or, you know, a case that's been most impactful to you, but I don't think you can name any. So I want to ask you about your favourite legal character.

[00:15:07] **Sally:** Oh, um. Less controversial.

[00:15:10] **Victoria:** Yeah, cases are tricky for me because obviously I signed the official secret pact when I joined in the government legal service in 1997. That was a long time ago. I know, I think

[00:15:21] **Sally:** I was at university. I did

[00:15:23] **Victoria:** litigation, um, all the way through. So it's colleagues will have seen me in court.

[00:15:29] **Victoria:** So it's [00:15:30] fairly obvious that I was involved in the most high profile litigation that the government was conducting over that time. And it was really exciting. And I loved every minute in terms of legal characters. It's got to be Rumpol. He's deaf. He might even be actually to answer your first question.

[00:15:45] **Victoria:** What got me into law in the first place, Rumpol on telly. At that point, I remember those programs really vividly. I thought he was. great. And then now when I've read the Rumpole books, which I redo every so often, I do wonder [00:16:00] if I'm becoming one of those caricatures who bangs on my, you know, my one big case.

[00:16:04] **Victoria:** And when I was doing this alone without a leader and so on, I completely get that older barristers do do

[00:16:11] **Sally:** that. I love that. I love that. But that's answered two questions in one actually on Rumpole, which I also love. What about wellbeing? You've got a family, I've got a family, I have a day job, you know, I prosecute and defend, all the things that come to us at the bar.

[00:16:26] **Sally:** In addition to that, you're a politician, you know, and [00:16:30] managing small children and sitting on a variety of boards. So I wonder, you know, you've got a big job in shorts. What do you do to look after your physical health and mental health, I suppose, but just so your wellness, um,

because you know, the Bar Council has been big at talking about well being, which we are at least talking about, but the reality is it's a tough, it's a tough job.

[00:16:50] **Sally:** You know, I didn't go to bed most nights before too. Uh, and so I just wondering your role. Which is like 10 times that. I, I'm the

[00:16:58] **Victoria:** other end of the spectrum. I, I make [00:17:00] sure I'm up for farming today. Right. So I start work really early. Which suits me and the way I like to function. It's easier now the girls have grown up.

[00:17:10] **Victoria:** Yes. broadly left home now. We had a slight, well it was lovely, we had a Ukrainian deliver this for the last 20 months, so that's almost been like having another daughter. Yeah. We love her very much. She's slightly moved out, she's working in Oxford in a week, but she was very keen on [00:17:30] keeping her bedroom and I was very pleased that the first weekend she, returned home with two of the most enormous bags of washing I have ever seen in my life.

[00:17:37] **Victoria:** So I think there's leaving home and there's sort of leaving home like my children too. Um, so that's been an unexpected blessing, if you like, when we thought our girls were nearly gone, suddenly we, we got another one. Um, my husband is, is a judge. So we talk about law a lot, which may not sound exciting to the rest.

[00:17:59] **Victoria:** to [00:18:00] the world, but it suits us. And we very much like living in the countryside as well. I know we're often in London in the week, but we both really value just being outside at weekends. We've always had a lot of animals and that's been a big part of my children's upbringing. So that means we sort of have to go and deal with them and sort out where we

[00:18:24] **Sally:** live.

[00:18:24] **Sally:** Yes. Yeah. Have escapism, if you like, from the day.

[00:18:28] **Victoria:** Yes, it is a bit like [00:18:30] that. It's quite hard work as well. Yeah. Um, so my family farm and I've always been quite involved in the family farm at weekends. Yes. And I still am. So Yes. The sort of downtime is, is almost work, but it's at least it's different.

[00:18:44] **Sally:** Yes, absolutely.

[00:18:45] **Sally:** Now I knew that about your family. So I'm going to ask you a question about the arches, uh, which I've listened to . I'm a huge artist. You're a huge artist. I used to be. What have

[00:18:55] **Victoria:** you stopped? Well, it's just, I'm so. Busy, but I understand that, [00:19:00] that the greatest archer's legal story has come to a conclusion.

[00:19:05] **Victoria:** Can I put it that way? Yes,

[00:19:06] **Sally:** yes. And my question was really

[00:19:09] **Victoria:** about I do have a tea towel over there with Free the Blossom Hill 1 on

[00:19:12] **Sally:** it. I need to get a photo of that before we, uh, of us. But what the archers was very good at, just very quickly, was coercive behaviour. Yeah,

[00:19:23] **Victoria:** exactly, well that is the greatest Archer's legal story.

[00:19:25] **Sally:** Exactly, but actually getting the public engaged with [00:19:30] legis Yeah, it was great. You know, I'm very keen for legislation not just to be some airy, fairy, mystical thing. For members of the public to understand, decently drafted Well, Sally,

[00:19:38] **Victoria:** this is my favourite thing to talk about. The Archers as a good vehicle for change.

[00:19:43] **Victoria:** Yes, yes. No, absolutely, that was actually a really important storyline. And it does show that used properly soap operas can be a really good way of educating the public about what we do. It's really hard to talk about the importance of law. It sounds really dry [00:20:00] to talk about the rule of law and the importance of different constitutional conventions and I know we wear funny clothes and we use funny language in court and that can be very off putting for the public.

[00:20:11] **Victoria:** But as soon as they get a real soap opera story that engages. them and they understand why fairness matters, justice matters, juries matter, and so on, then it really brings it to life. And actually, genuinely, I do think that, um, programs like that have a real role in public legal [00:20:30] education. Absolutely, and

[00:20:30] **Sally:** have, and have had.

[00:20:32] **Sally:** Yeah. Um, and we

[00:20:33] **Victoria:** freed the Blossom Hill once, so there

[00:20:35] **Sally:** we are. Absolutely, absolutely. Now I've got about two questions left, mainly because you've got to go. The first one is Can you explain, really, what's the difference in your role and the Justice Minister? Because people get confused. I know, but I want to hear it from you.

[00:20:48] **Sally:** Okay, it's quite a big difference.

[00:20:49] **Victoria:** Yes. Um, so, the Justice Minister has a big department to run. He is responsible for the prison service, which is an enormous and for the [00:21:00] court services and for various other important, uh, you know, different bits of the system which need to work properly. Yes. Um, I don't do that.

[00:21:09] **Victoria:** I am the lawyer doing the law and I must say it suits me very well. Yeah. Um, so I, I have a small department. I also have a supervisory function over the CPS and the Serious Fraud Office. But I don't actually run them. I just ask the right questions and try and [00:21:30] ensure that they're being run properly. And I do, um, I'm accountable for them in Parliament and to other parts of government.

[00:21:36] **Victoria:** But that's different from actually running something. Um, so most of what I do is law. Most of what the Lord Chancellor does, so he has important functions like upholding the rule of law and working with the judiciary, but most of what he does is running things and making sure the department functions well.

[00:21:56] **Sally:** Excellent, excellent. Now, I notice you've been on a bit [00:22:00] of a road tour.

[00:22:04] **Sally:** You're exciting

[00:22:05] **Victoria:** and interesting and relevant. Don't laugh at me, that's what you were trying to do too.

[00:22:09] **Sally:** Yeah, well yeah, and I mean, I missed it, but people don't necessarily know this. that there are government legal departments in Manchester. Yeah,

[00:22:19] **Victoria:** and this is really important because everybody should come and work for us because we do the best law, just saying.

[00:22:24] **Victoria:** But, um, we in GLD, so the government legal department, really strongly [00:22:30] feel that not all the best lawyers are in London. Here, here. There are really good lawyers in other parts of the country and we want to make sure that we harness the talent of people who we wouldn't necessarily have thought about employing before we had these new offices.

[00:22:44] **Victoria:** So there's a very well established office in Bristol, there's a great one in Leeds. It's a really fabulous building in a very exciting legal district. Yes. Really exciting new office in Manchester that I opened a [00:23:00] couple of months ago now. Increasingly we're growing that, that talent pool there. We are very much recruiting in the government legal service.

[00:23:09] **Victoria:** I know from personal experience that it's a fabulous career with a really good group of people. And I can't recommend it highly

[00:23:17] **Sally:** enough. Fantastic. Now, my last question. Uh, is this. I know I said two questions in time, but I'll have to squeeze in one. Is what's next? I feel like, you know, uh, you're at the pinnacle of your career.

[00:23:29] **Sally:** [00:23:30] Uh, and as I look at the cabinet, there aren't very many women. That's an observation by me. I'm the half woman in the UK, I suppose. But what's next, Prime Minister? Well, no,

[00:23:40] **Victoria:** I think attorney is a very good fit for me. I love it. I love doing law. I love advising the government on law. It's all I've ever done really.

[00:23:53] **Victoria:** Um, since I left the independent bar when I was very, very junior and definitely what excites me is [00:24:00] making sure that the rule of law is real. Both within government and within the country as a whole. I have no idea what I'll do next and or when next will come. Yes. So I'll just, I'm sure I'll always be busy.

[00:24:13] **Victoria:** My dad is still working hard and he's nearly 81. So. Wow. And my granny, who only died recently, I think worked till, till the end. She was asking for foreign language audiotapes because she couldn't read books in foreign languages anymore. And I really want to be like [00:24:30] that. Yeah,

[00:24:30] **Sally:** fantastic, fantastic. Well, Attorney General, thank you so much for being part of this great interview with me and talking law.

[00:24:38] **Sally:** I'm thrilled that you came on the podcast. Thanks Sally, it was

[00:24:40] **Victoria:** fun.

[00:24:41] **Sally:** Thanks to the Attorney General, the Right Honourable Victoria Prentice, for telling me all about her career and life in the law in this interview. Let me tell you about some upcoming Women in the Law UK events. Do join us on the 7th of February at 5pm on Zoom for a webinar called [00:25:00] Judicial Roles, Part Time Judicial Roles.

[00:25:03] **Sally:** On the 7th of March, our annual dinner will be taking place celebrating International Women's Day at 7pm in Manchester. Tickets are all available on Eventbrite. There is also an International Women's Day conference. The following day on the 8th of March, 10 to 4 p. m. at Irwin Mitchell, with a great line of speakers and subjects with a theme covering imposter syndrome.

[00:25:28] **Sally:** Finally, our annual [00:25:30] conference will be held on the 22nd and November. There are also a variety of other monthly events, including a book club, which are held virtually. Do visit www.womeninthelawuk.com in order to find out what's coming up. And finally, don't miss my next book in the series, book six, Talking Law and Leadership, which should be out in the new year.

[00:25:55] **Sally:** If you would like to support the Talking Law podcast, then there are many ways. Please [00:26:00] do get in touch. You can also follow me on Twitter, at Sally Penny Wan. And on Instagram, SJ Sally Penney and on LinkedIn, Sally Penney, MBE, or simply follow women in the Law UK on LinkedIn. There are plenty of other episodes of Talking Law for you to listen to with guests, including Baroness, Tanny, Gray Thompson, the Secret Barrister.

[00:26:25] **Sally:** Lord David, panic KC, and so much more. Thank [00:26:30] you so much for our production team, our Purposeful podcast. I'm Sally Penney, MBE. Bye for now.