

Thursday, 24th June 2010

## Bench bids farewell to punctual judge

Waylon Johnston



“In the rush to get back, I think I got dressed in the car, drove my Mini Minor like a maniac through the streets... “ - Mr Justice Joseph Galea Debono. Photo: Chris Sant Fournier.

A humble Mr Justice Joseph Galea Debono yesterday ended a 40-year legal career saying he had done nothing out of the ordinary but simply applied the law.

As part of a farewell tribute planned by Chief Justice Vincent De Gaetano, as Mr Justice Galea Debono addressed the jurors in a murder trial, his fellow judges walked in quietly and sat down in the public gallery, taking him by surprise.

At one point, he encouraged the jurors to concentrate because not even he was used to such a large audience during the summing up of a trial by jury. Also in the hall were his two daughters, lawyers and other friends.

Once the jurors were sent to deliberate on the verdict, lawyer Edward Gatt, vice-president of the Chamber of Advocates, moved to the front of the courtroom and thanked him for the eight years of service he had given as a judge.

Thanks to Mr Justice Galea Debono, lawyers had grown accustomed to a “certain luxury”, whereby all the trials by jury that had been pending for a number of years were concluded without their clients having to wait for ages before justice was done, he said.

“We also became used to criminal appeals that were appointed and decided in the shortest time possible after spending years dragging in the Magistrates’ Court,” Dr Gatt said.

He said Mr Justice Galea Debono was appointed judge at a critical time in the history of the Maltese courts when there was need for trust in the justice system to be restored and for the public to know there were still judges and lawyers with integrity.

Without a doubt, Mr Justice Galea Debono had helped to restore respect in the courts, Dr Gatt said, hoping it would continue this way.

He called on the government to follow the same principles used in the nomination of Mr Justice Galea Debono when a new judge was appointed, highlighting his extensive experience, particularly in criminal law, which enabled him to quickly grasp the cases before him and understand what was going on in court.

While wishing the retiring judge the rest he merited after a “brilliant” career, Dr Gatt joked that it was also a special day for the prison's director because it was likely that now he could start to solve the space problem that had recently been created (a veiled reference to the fact that Mr Justice Galea Debono had decided many criminal cases in record time).

Speaking off the cuff, Mr Justice Galea Debono recalled the time when he became a lawyer in 1968, his voice wavering slightly with emotion.

But he was quick to make light of the moment and add a touch of humour, recounting a particular incident that taught him to be the stickler for punctuality he is renowned to be.

During a particular case at the beginning of his legal career, the presiding judge, Maurice Caruana Curran, whom he holds in high esteem, had postponed the sitting for a break until 4 p.m.

The excited young lawyer had gone home for a nap, only to oversleep and wake up in a panic at the time the sitting was meant to start.

“In the rush to get back, I think I got dressed in the car, drove my Mini Minor like a maniac through the streets and was probably still doing up my fly as I entered the hall... only to find no one there.”

The judge was going to be an hour late but henceforth punctuality would become one of the trademarks of Mr Justice Galea Debono, who synchronised his time with St John's Co-Cathedral's clock ever since.

Whenever he put off a case for sentencing, he made sure it was given on that day... or earlier.

The judge took the opportunity to congratulate the Chief Justice on his appointment to the European Court of Human Rights and ended his speech saying he had done nothing out of the ordinary. All he had done was apply the law, no more, no less.