



John Gould has no intention of retiring just yet — but plans to drink more wine when he does

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IN CONVERSATION | JOHN GOULD

## ‘I applaud people in legal aid provision, but they do it at huge sacrifice’

John Gould has made a career regulating the profession and managing a successful firm, but worries about those ‘culturally focused on money’, writes Catherine Baksi

Catherine Baksi

Thursday May 30 2024, 12.01am, The Times

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John Gould joined the London law firm Russell Cooke as an articled clerk in 1978, when, by his own admission, the once-grand Edwardian solicitor’s office, founded in 1880, was “a shambles”.

“Nobody was interested in managing anything and the firm was incapable of producing a budget,” he recalls.

Gould took matters into his own hands and from 1985 led the management team before he was given the title of managing

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more than 220 lawyers with a turnover of over £40 million a year.

He steps down next month, but will remain a fee earner and take on the role of chairman of the firm and chairman of the partner remuneration committee, which, he jokes, “will mean I’m treated with appropriate respect”.

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During his career, which has focused on regulatory and disciplinary law, Gould has written practitioner’s textbooks and been involved in interventions that have resulted in the closure of more than 250 law firms and several long-running battles with dishonest solicitors involved in organised crime.

High-profile cases include Paul Francis Simms, former senior partner of the Bower Cotton Partnership, struck off in 2004; Shahrokh Mireskandari, who ran the law firm Dean & Dean and was struck off in 2012 after it was discovered that he had faked his legal qualifications and hid criminal convictions while representing celebrity clients; and Paul Baxendale-Walker, struck off in 2007 having advised wealthy individuals on tax avoidance schemes, which were later found not to be legal.

On the reputation of his profession — which has taken knocks from the Post Office-Horizon scandal — Gould says that while people who have been involved in legal cases “think their own lawyer is very good, when asked about lawyers generally, the kind of paradigm is unfavourable”.

Gould attributes that low esteem to the high cost of legal services. Lawyers, he says, are seen as “remote and expensive”,

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“I applaud people who have stayed in legal aid provision, but they can only do it at huge sacrifice,” he says, highlighting the impact that “exploitative” legal aid fees have had on young barristers who have “suffered atrociously”.

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Under Gould’s leadership, Russell Cooke has made a commitment to ensuring that 5 per cent of its revenue is derived from legal aid work because, he says, “it’s a good thing to do and it improves the values of the firm”.

For firms that do not do legal aid work, says Gould, who acted in the Grenfell Tower inquiry: “The danger is that culturally they get too focused on money”.

He also acted for a City law firm partner who was embroiled in the furore over the non-disclosure order signed by Zelda Perkins in her “MeToo” dispute with the disgraced Hollywood film mogul, Harvey Weinstein.

Born in Bristol, Gould was the youngest of six children and grew up on the city’s council estates. His parents left school at 14 — his mother went into domestic service and his father became a grocer’s boy.

His father thought that a clerical job with Bristol city council would be the “ultimate career”, offering security and a step up the social ladder. Having enjoyed a library book on the law as a teenager and partly to push back against his father’s advice, Gould read law at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge.

He thought the solicitor's profession seemed a "secure job" in which he could make a "reasonable living". But his university supervisor thought he was "making a big mistake", warning that it would be "much too dull and boring" and advising that he go into industry instead.

"He might have been right," says Gould, but "luckily Russell Cooke gave me an opportunity to indulge both sides, by doing law as well as practice management."

Gould notes that without the advantages of a middle class background, he did not know the difference between law firms and randomly applied to three. At the first, one partner who interviewed him, a Tory MP, spent the whole time on the telephone arranging drinks.

At the second, Gould was kept waiting for an hour and half, while at the third — Russell Cooke — the senior partner offered him a job within four minutes and another man gave him his £5 travel fare from his own pocket.

Gould became a regulatory law specialist by accident, when no one else at the firm wanted to get involved in a case from the Law Society to intervene in a Brixton practice that was managed by a "sad alcoholic".

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An adviser to the 2021 independent review of legal services regulation by Stephen Mason, Gould says that the Legal Service Act is too “complicated” and “based on a misconception of how you get better access for legal services”.

While there should be a single licensing body to regulate legal services, he argues that the solicitor and barrister titles are best regulated by the professionals themselves. Gould argues that the Solicitors Regulation Authority lacks the experience to regulate alternative business structures — legal practices with non-lawyer partners — which should be done by a separate body similar to the Financial Conduct Authority.

Mocked for his Bristol accent — which he has since lost — when he joined the profession, social inclusion is important to Gould, who advises newly qualified solicitors on dealing with adverse perceptions.

Away from the law, Gould has a home in Hereford with three acres of land that he is turning into a nature reserve. He also chairs Genuwine — a wine anti-counterfeiting collaboration between brokers, dealers and auction houses.

Stressing that he is not yet retiring, he says that when he does, he plans to drink more wine.

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