

BRIEF *Encounters*

Lucy Garrett QC provides an insight into her motivations for a sabbatical in Sierra Leone.

So Lucy, what is your big news?

I am going on sabbatical to do a very exciting job working for a not-for-profit organisation, the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (<https://institute.global>) in Sierra Leone. I will be working for the Governance part of TBI, which works with governments and leaders of fragile, developing and emerging states to enhance their effectiveness, in order to help them actually deliver reforms or projects that help the people of the country. I'll be based in Freetown, working for the elected Mayor – the inspirational Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr, OBE.

TBI provides embedded teams of professionals who work “shoulder to shoulder” with governments. This means that in practice I am effectively seconded to the Mayor’s office and will work side by side with her and her team at Freetown City Council. My new office is pictured above – it’s quite similar to the old, pre-refurbishment Keating Chambers, but of course bears no resemblance to the new shiny version.

The TBI teams’ dedication and courage can’t be understated. For example, TBI stayed in Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia during the Ebola crisis in 2014 – 2016 and helped the governments of those countries to organise a systematic response.

TBI’s work is government-led, ie. I am there to help implement the policies which the mayor was elected to deliver. I find this very appealing as I believe that Sierra Leoneans are best placed to know what Sierra Leone needs and wants.

It doesn’t sound like it involves law at all.

It doesn’t. I’m really a civil servant. My formal title is Governance Advisor. I’m going to lead the Mayor’s private office team.

What has made you do this now, when you have just taken silk?

The taking silk part is a coincidence. I actually applied for and in principle got a job with TBI in January 2017, before I even applied for silk. It was a combination of waiting for a suitable role to come up and finishing a big case which meant that I have taken silk just before leaving. But I’ve been thinking about doing something like this for a long time.

I’ve always been interested in and involved in charity-type work. At university I was nicknamed Banners Garrett because I was always campaigning about something or other (I expect members of chambers are rolling their eyes in recognition at this point). After university, when I was travelling, I worked on two charity projects for a couple of months, one in a leprosy rehabilitation centre in India and one building a health centre in northern Kenya, near Lake Turkana (the location was near where they filmed those desert scenes in *The Constant Gardener*). It was the second of these projects which taught me that any help you want to give, must, to be useful, be what the local people want: it turned out on that project that what Nairobi Kenyans who had organised it thought was required wasn’t what the tribal Kenyans who actually lived there thought at all.

After I got tenancy, I pretty much fell in love with the Bar – the work is so interesting, and so much fun. I did continue to do some charity work but my contribution was mostly financial for a long time. I’m sure a lot of people reading are familiar with the feeling that giving money doesn’t really seem to change anything (although please keep giving everyone: there’s nothing like a month in Freetown to convince you that money is desperately needed), and of course it’s not usually possible to see the specific concrete effect of what you’ve given. Because of this, in 2016 I gave my spare room to an Eritrean refugee for 6 months, and I spent a lot of the second half of 2017 organising a fundraising dinner with Ben Keenan of Brookfield Multiplex – as many of you will know, we raised over £130,000 for the Refugee Council and (equally important) had a really great night.

Over the same kind of period, since about 2015, I started actively looking for an opportunity to work in development. I obviously hugely admire people who work in crisis response, but I don’t have any skills to offer in that area, and those reading will readily appreciate that expertise in litigation and a deep familiarity with Scott Schedules is not particularly useful to charities such as Amnesty International or Medicsans Frontiers. I was however very keen to find something which allowed me to use some of my barrister skills, and eventually I discovered TBI, which actively

recruits from the private sector as well as those with a development background. I particularly like the idea that I’ll be able to contribute in a small way to implementing structures and systems which make crises less likely, or enable countries to recover faster from those that do occur.

I also wanted to have an adventure. I think Africa will certainly fulfil that objective!

What’s it like in Sierra Leone?

The country is very beautiful – smothered in rainforest and palm trees and with stunning white sand beaches (I have already been to two). There is very serious poverty, and Freetown has many slum communities, but I can already see that the Western impression of Sierra Leone consisting of war, blood diamonds and Ebola is completely wrong. Everyone said before I left that Sierra Leoneans were incredibly friendly and welcoming, and this has turned out to be absolutely true.

I have an enormous flat with a veranda and the weather is still amazing even though the rainy season should have already fully started.

Are you coming back?!

I have to say I’m not missing delay analysis yet. But yes indeed. I am hoping to do at least a year here, but I will certainly come back. Apart from anything else, I need to take up the challenge of practice in silk – and I already bought the gown.

Lucy Garrett QC was called to the Bar in 2001 and has practised at Keating Chambers since 2004. She has an impressive specialist practice in construction, engineering, energy and shipbuilding and particularly enjoys disputes involving complex technical issues. Lucy won Chambers and Partners’ Construction Junior of the Year in 2013 and was nominated again in 2015. She was made Queen’s Counsel in 2018.



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