

Britain sees its first black High Court judge appointed

Darren Sylvester reports on Linda Dobbs's appointment as a High Court judge

The High Court is to get its first black judge. The Lord Chancellor, Lord [Charlie] Falconer of Thoroton, QC, will appoint Linda Dobbs, QC, to the £150,878 post next month. 53 year-old Ms Dobbs, after hearing that the Department of Constitutional Affairs confirmed that she would take up the role in October, said: "It is a great honour to have been invited by the Lord Chancellor to become a High Court judge. Whilst this appointment might be seen as casting me into the role of standard bearer, I am simply a practitioner following a career path. I am confident, nevertheless, that I am the first of many to come".

Ms Dobbs's appointment will take the number of women High Court judges into double figures, to 10 out of 108 (9.26 per cent). Even at the next level down, the circuit bench, only one circuit judge out of 623 identifies herself as "black", while eight others describe themselves as "non-white". Collectively, the nine circuit judges from an "ethnic minority background" equate to 1.44 per cent.

The appointment comes as the government tries to increase diversity in the judiciary and reform a profession that has traditionally recruited men from an overwhelmingly white, middle class background.

The search for a suitably qualified lawyer to become the first black High Court judge dates back to the last Tory Lord Chancellor, Lord Mackay of Clashfern, who had earmarked Patricia Scotland, QC, before the Conservatives lost the 1997 election. Instead, and as the Labour peer, Baroness Scotland of Asthal became the first black woman to be appointed a government minister.

Ms Dobbs, who is divorced, is a leading criminal QC and has just stepped down as chairperson of the Criminal Bar Association, the biggest specialist group at the Bar. She has also chaired the Bar's race relations committee and its professional standards committee. Ms Dobbs has published books and articles on road traffic law, and her main areas of work include white-collar crime; Customs and Excise cases and serious sexual offences.

Courtney Griffiths, QC, who chairs the Bar's public affairs committee, said: "It's a very appropriate appointment. She's extremely competent and rightly respected within the profession".

Darren Sylvester is a barrister and a member of the DONA.

<http://www.darrensylvester.com>