

New year to herald new opportunities

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ANYONE who attended the Tercentenary WA Wilson Lecture at Edinburgh University could not help but be struck by the wholly different world described by this year's speaker, Lord Hope of Craighead, when he recounted his experiences at university more than 40 years ago.

As another year draws to a close, I wonder if 2007 will come to be recognised as a year of further significant change for the legal profession?

Certainly, it has had its moments and the election of a new government in Scotland has brought about a change of mood in the legal world as elsewhere.

Earlier this year, I wrote about the value of leadership in the legal profession. The end of the year perhaps offers an opportunity to reflect on that essential ingredient in our futures, particularly as the pace of change seems likely to continue unabated. Who are the emerging or existing leaders in today's profession? Who is demonstrating the courage and wisdom to address change in a constructive way?

The new cabinet secretary for justice has shown a refreshing willingness to engage in the issues of the day and with the various constituencies who play important roles in the justice system. Scots lawyers will be pleased by the clarity of his support for the independence of the legal system and its role in modern Scottish society.

The President of the Law Society of Scotland, who achieved office earlier than expected but who now has a further 18 months to make his mark, has shown a welcome intelligence, insight and thoughtfulness about the big issues facing not only his branch of the profession but the law as a whole.

We have a new Dean of the Faculty of Advocates. Recognised as an outstanding advocate, his opportunity will be to balance the traditions of independence of the Bar with the serious challenges presented by a consumer-oriented market place in the 21st century, and to present the Bar as a modern, receptive body addressing the perceptions held by its clients and others as well as its own members' interests.

Lord Gill, the Lord Justice Clerk, heads up the major review of the civil justice system, which is underway. The consultation paper of the review group, just published, offers a rare opportunity to examine fundamental questions about the role and place of the courts at all levels. Last Monday, at a conference marking the launch of the paper, Lord Gill spoke of his desire for consensus and co-operation, leading to confidence in the success of whatever decisions are made about the future of the system of justice. To that might be added the value of the complementary role which many groups, individuals and processes can play.

Lord Gill's themes reflect an emerging trend in leadership thinking around the world. This involves authenticity, genuinely connecting with people, and speaking in ways which they understand. How you interact with others in the world matters more than having mere knowledge and skill. This requires self-awareness, reflection and openness to learning. It is not about hierarchy, obedience, command and control, but a more fluid and sophisticated

concept of leadership based on enabling others to achieve what needs to be done. It is, I suppose, about applying common sense.

The conference last week could leave no-one present in doubt that significant change is ahead of us. To carry this through, we will need to identify the next generation of leaders. Where are they? Where will they come from? Who will identify, support and mentor them? At the end of 2007, I sense there are grounds for anticipation, even excitement, as we look ahead. I sense also that we shall see other, perhaps surprising, changes as those within the profession re-align themselves and look for new challenges.