

Picture-blogging in the Supreme Court

Blogging artist Isobel Williams on her work in the highest court in the land



R v Hughes seen two ways: here and on the opposite page (cropped detail)



A tweeter put me in my place by recommending my blog post “not for the drawings, but brilliant comments from Baroness Hale”.

Since July 2012 I have been an occasional blogger-with-a-difference in the Supreme Court, with the court’s permission. The difference is that I illustrate my blog with drawings which I do on the spot; I rarely embellish them afterwards.

As far as the words go, there are plenty of lawyers who produce technical analyses of the proceedings. Being a non-lawyer, I riff on the general theme of the case, such as terrorism (*R v Gul*), harassment (*Hayes v Willoughby*) or pensions (*Nortel* and *Lehman*). Sometimes I go off on a tangent, as when drawing itself became my story in *Bull v Hall*.

Concerning the pictures, there are practicalities. I can’t use some of my favourite drawing materials – bamboo pens, wooden coffee stirrers, quills, sheep’s wool tufts – as they need to

be dipped in ink. Splashing a bottle of that onto the multi-coloured carpet designed by Sir Peter Blake would not endear me to the authorities. Similarly, I have to avoid the noisy friction of extravagant sweeps across textured paper.

Like the Derby, the Supreme Court is on the flat – no elevated jury, no witness box – so from the public seats it’s about the backs of heads and chairs, with the justices far away across the howling tundra. How do you deal with that? Sometimes I experiment with transparent outlines. In the drawing of *R v Hughes* (opposite), the justices are pink ectoplasm, the staff and judicial assistants orange. Opera glasses are an option I am yet to explore.

In each courtroom, discreet amplification emphasises every breath, every rustle, every moment of nervous tension. In the stark white box



Lord Sumption



Lord Neuberger

of Court 2, the plushy floral curtains aren't enough to insulate counsel from the relentless scrape of the minute hand on the slate clock or the finality of the omega on the court emblem. It's all right for me – I can just sit here scribbling and finger-painting with compressed charcoal while fine minds deal in cool abstractions.

So which is more important, the art or the text? The answer is neither: it's the Supreme Court itself. One day when I noted some choice *aperçus* from the bench, a tweeter put me in my place by recommending my blog post 'not for the drawings, but brilliant comments from Baroness Hale'. ●

Posts are on www.isobelwilliams.blogspot.com (click on the 'Supreme Court' label) and on www.ukscblog.com, the independent blog about the Supreme Court run by Matrix and Olswang.

 Contributor **Isobel Williams**
Blotting artist

Judging images



The 2005 and 2013 legal reporting reforms have given rise to initiatives and new images which feed into a new Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project: *Judging Images: the making, management and consumption of judicial images*. Leslie J Moran reflects upon this project and on Isobel Williams's work

Isobel Williams is not so much a courtroom artist, commissioned to produce court pictures for an image hungry media, but an artist interpreting her courtroom experiences in words and pictures. Her licence to draw in the Supreme Court is indicative of a new relationship between courts and visual media.

From birth the Supreme Court was, by s.47 of the Constitutional Reform Act of 2005, unshackled from the provisions of s.41 Criminal Justice Act 1925 prohibiting the making of visual representations in a courtroom and their publication. Since October 2013 new rules allow proceedings in the Court of Appeal to be recorded and broadcast.

Isobel's drawings expose the lie that the camera's eye has a monopoly when it comes to producing honest, penetrating and revealing representations. In contrast to the problematic assumptions that tie the image making capacity of camera technology to objectivity and truth, Isobel's drawings make a virtue of her presence and perspective. It is apparent in her sometimes sparse and sometimes frenzied economy of lines and use of blocks of colour.

Her drawings capture an enduring obscurity in this age of transparency. A black wall of advocates' broad backs topped off with the baroque lines of their wigs often obscures the judges who appear as little more than remote partly obscured knot-like caricatures. There is also a curious haunting and haunted portrayal of transparency, achieved by depicting the advocates as empty outlines or as diaphanous presences. Through these figures the judges and judicial assistants dotting the horizon stand out, their caricatured faces accentuated by Technicolor halos.

Five minutes watching Sky's live-stream of court proceedings or judges reading summary judgments on YouTube proves that judicial activity is 'visually challenging'. The drama is verbal, written, and cerebral. Someone head down reading out loud from a rustling set of papers makes for a dull static image. In contrast Isobel's drawings have great vitality. They are rich in visual metaphors and storytelling capacity.

Her work is a new addition to a previously sparsely populated public gallery of courtroom and judicial images. It also offers a welcome counterpoint to the preoccupation with cameras and video images that fuels the dash to televise court proceedings.

The initiatives and new images flowing from the 2005 and 2013 reforms feed into a new project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council: *Judging Images: the making, management and consumption of judicial images*. With Professor Linda Mulcahy of the London School of Economics our objective is to bring together practitioners and researchers to explore the past, present and future of judicial image making.

Studying the judicial image provides new opportunities to examine current and emerging concepts of justice and generate new insights into under researched and neglected dimensions of debates about the legitimacy of law and confidence in the institutions of justice.

The *Judging Images* project is built around a website and four events; three workshops and a public lecture. For further information email: l.moran@bbk.ac.uk.

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