



**The Right Honourable Dame Helen Winkelmann  
Chief Justice of New Zealand  
Te Tumu Whakawā o Aotearoa**

Press statement

2 April 2020

The Honourable Justice Susan Thomas is to become New Zealand's next Chief High Court Judge following Justice Geoffrey Venning's decision to step down from the role and return to full-time judging.

Justice Venning, who was appointed as Chief High Court Judge in 2015, will continue in the role until 31 May.

The changes in the High Court's leadership were announced in a statement released by Attorney-General David Parker today.

Chief Justice Helen Winkelmann said Justice Venning's calm, measured leadership and superb administrative abilities characterised his five years of service in the role. The Chief Justice said Justice Venning was an outstanding judge, and during his time as Chief High Court Judge he had decided some of New Zealand's most important and challenging cases.

The Chief Justice said that after carrying the additional and heavy administrative and leadership responsibilities that come with the role of Chief High Court Judge for five years, Justice Venning had decided to take this step to refocus his energies on judging.

"Justice Venning's effective leadership of the High Court, and his obvious intellectual strengths as a judge have earned him the respect and confidence of the High Court Bench and of the profession. I am pleased that the judge will be able to continue to serve his community through his on-going work as a High Court judge."

As Chief High Court Judge Justice Venning maintained the Earthquake list in Christchurch and established a number of other lists to deal with particular areas of the Court's work. He oversaw the centralisation of circuit work to the three main registries and established the Commercial Panel under the Senior Courts Act 2016.

## **Justice Susan Thomas**

Justice Venning's successor, Justice Susan Thomas, has served as a judge for 15 years. She was first appointed as a District Court Judge in 2005 and then to the High Court in 2014, sitting for three years in Auckland before relocating to Wellington where she is now based.

In 2012, while working as a District Court judge, Justice Thomas started the Special Circumstances Court in Wellington, engaging with the community and its resources to focus on the most challenged and marginalised offenders.

The Chief Justice said Justice Thomas would bring to the role of Chief High Court Judge broad knowledge of the court system as a whole and of the wider social context in which it operates. Justice Thomas is also a skilled administrator: she chairs the Judicial Reference Group charged with working with the Ministry of Justice to plan for and oversee technological innovation within the courts.

She has also taken a leadership role in work underway within the justice system to improve access to justice and to improve the support of the courts' processes in the area of criminal justice.

Justice Thomas graduated with a BA and LLB (Hons) from Auckland University in 1982, Senior Scholar and recipient of the Auckland District Law Society prize for best undergraduate record. She practised as a solicitor with the Auckland firm of Holmden Horrocks before relocating to London the following year. She was admitted as a solicitor in England and Wales and spent almost 10 years initially as a commercial lawyer in private practice and as an in-house counsel and then as a partner in a London legal firm.

On her return to New Zealand in 1995 Justice Thomas joined Minter Ellison Rudd Watts becoming a partner shortly afterwards.

## **Appointment of Associate Judge Dani Lee Gardiner**

The Chief Justice also welcomed today's appointment of Auckland barrister and solicitor, Dani Lee Gardiner, as an Associate Judge of the High Court.

Associate Judge Gardiner will sit in Auckland. Since 2018 Judge Gardiner has been General Counsel for the Auckland Council, heading the Council's in-house legal, risk and insurance department. She joined the Council in 2015 managing the Council's Public Law team.

Associate Judge Gardiner graduated from the University of Otago with an LLB (Hons) in 1995 and began her career as a solicitor at DLA Piper New Zealand. In 1997 she relocated to London and took up a position with Herbert Smith Freehills, practising in commercial litigation. She returned to New Zealand and joined Chapman Tripp in Auckland in 2002, where she practised in insurance and commercial litigation.

In 2013 Associate Judge Gardiner obtained an LLM (Hons) from the University of Auckland, and practised public law from 2013 to 2014 at Chen Palmer.

Associate Judge Gardiner has also been an independent director of Devon Funds Management Limited since 2014 and Investment Services Group Limited since 2017. She has now resigned those positions.

The Chief Justice said that in her work as an Associate Judge, Associate Judge Gardiner will be able to call upon the depth of experience she has gained through her time in private legal practice, through her directorships and through her involvement with local government.

Helen Winkelmann  
**Chief Justice/Te Tumu Whakawā**

[Link to AG statement](#)

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