

**ADDRESS GIVEN AT THE RE-OPENING CEREMONY
OF THE DUNEDIN COURTHOUSE**

Dunedin, Friday 26 January 2018

Sian Elias*

Te whare e tu nei, e tu rangatira koe
E nga mate, haere atu ra.
E nga kano hi ora
E te iwi Kai Tahu, kei te mihi, kei te mihi.
No reira Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa.

Prime Minister, Your Worship Mr Cull, Members of Parliament, Ladies and Gentlemen:

This is the fourth occasion on which this historic courthouse has been opened or re-opened at a ceremony such as this. At the first opening in 1902, Sir Joseph Ward commented with understandable satisfaction that the building had been erected for the “cheapest cost” of any building of such character in New Zealand.

It may be that such thrift was in the end counterproductive. The limitation of the acoustics, heating, ventilation and organisation of the space were soon evident. They led to modifications almost from the outset although hot water did not arrive for 20 years. Some of the improvements such as the asbestos coatings introduced in the 1955 reconstruction have been the cause of remedial work themselves.

The Law Society and City Council had been pressing for a permanent home for the courts in what they considered, with justification, to be the foremost legal community of the country, regarded as the “nursery” of the legal profession in New Zealand. But they were dismayed about the lack of consultation on the plans for the courts by the Ministry of Works and the failure of the design to make provision for future needs. Those involved in courthouse design and planning today might be excused for the thought that some things do not ever seem to change. But everyone was impressed by the boldness of the design provided by John Campbell which has been described as “in the Gothic style but with a Scottish Baronial inflection”.

The first and second reconstructions of the courthouse took place at about fifty-year intervals. At the third reopening, which followed the second reconstruction in 2003, I rather rashly expressed confidence that the work then undertaken would do us proud at least for the next half century. I did not expect to be around for the next re-opening. As you know, that expectation was confounded by the tragedy in Christchurch and by the realisation that this building required significant earthquake strengthening.

Even in 1902 there had been criticism of the site. Partly on account of the noise from the nearby railway station and sawmill. Partly on account of the smell from the nearby sewage discharge into the harbour. But also because the land on which the

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courthouse is built was reclaimed. As soon as it was opened the building was said to shake significantly any time a heavy vehicle passed by. Ominous signs of stress soon appeared. The stone embellishments on the façade were alarmingly brittle. Before the 1955 upgrade the ceiling of one of the courtrooms collapsed while the court was sitting. Before the 2003 repairs the arm and sword of the statue of Justice came crashing down, a distressing blow to the symbol of Justice and also a demonstration of clear and present danger. It came to be appreciated that the potential risks from earthquake were greatly amplified by the soaring tower that capped off Campbell's design. When I sat here before the 2003 rebuild the library, now a splendid common room, was not able to be used because of the risk.

It is not surprising that the estimates for the present rebuild were eye-watering. It is rumoured that Treasury and the Ministry of Justice were initially of the view that the cost was not justified. The option of making the premises in High Street the permanent home of the Courts was canvassed. That this option was not taken, is because of the realisation that if the historic courthouse was abandoned something precious would be lost for all of us.

It took some doing to shift attitudes on this. At this time it is right to acknowledge the lead taken by members of the legal profession and the Dunedin City Council. I would like to single out for mention Anne Stevens, the Mayor Mr Cull and Councillor Mr Benson-Pope, and the local Members of Parliament. They persuaded the then Minister of Justice, Amy Adams, who in turn convinced the government that saving the courthouse was a national priority.

We should all be very grateful to those who have brought about this rehabilitation. It is not simply because without it we would have lost a rare and important public building. I do not diminish the importance of preserving our built cultural heritage. We have too few important public buildings such as this. But as important as the preservation of an historic building is the demonstration the building provides of the value our community places on the administration of justice.

A court is not of course a building. The administration of justice does not require any particular dignity in housing. But a beautiful setting such as this is constant reminder of the community's expectations and hopes for justice and it is a constant spur to all of us to live up to them.

Those expectations were voiced at the very beginning in New Zealand, well before there was any machinery for the administration of justice. Much at the talk at Waitangi was of law and justice. We have continued to be a nation that expects that justice according to law will be found in courthouses such as this and that justice will be accessible to all. The magnificence of this restored courthouse is a symbol of that hope and a reminder of the obligations we have in our turn to live up to the expectations of the men and women whose lives are entwined with the history of this building. Justice is a big idea - and the symbols of big ideas matter.

I want to congratulate all those who have worked on this restoration, the Ministry of Justice, the builders and tradesmen and contractors. It is a joy to see this building so magnificent and alive again. I know the result we admire has come with great effort and commitment. To the project I also want to express appreciation to the staff of the

court and the resident judges who have put up with the disruption of rebuilding and moving cheerfully while keeping the courts open for business. It helped very much that the Ministry did a great job of securing and setting up excellent temporary premises in High Street, for which I know that those who work in the Dunedin courts are very grateful. I would like to thank in particular the Court manager and Registrar, David Tapp, and the Criminal Services Manager, Alister Frengley. They have worked tirelessly to achieve the results we admire today while keeping the courts running. They seem never to sleep. The judges are particularly grateful to Terri-Lee Donaldson who kept everything secure.

Finally, I want to congratulate the city of Dunedin and the Government on this successful project. They have delivered a courthouse of which we are all very proud.

No reira, tena koutou, tena koutou, tena ra tatou katoa.
