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*“Round my kitchen table podcast: Do the Inns of Court need modernising
05 January 2012*

Chair:

[Alex Aldridge](#) (AA)

Guests:

Anthony Dursi (AD) – Recruitment and Outreach manager at Inner Temple

Kevin Poulter (KP) – Employment law solicitor/guru at Bircham Dyson Bell

AA:

Hello and welcome to this year’s edition of ‘Round the Kitchen Table Podcast’, back for 2012 and from my lovely relaxing holiday in Morocco with me...

AD:

That’s a very good voice Alex.

AA:

Transcribed by [@Kieran_McNeff](#) for www.StretLaw.co.uk

Thank you I do my special deeper voice when I introduce the podcast, then I gradually loosen up.

AD:

I think that's an excellent idea.

AA:

This voice that you're hearing is Anthony Dursi, who is the recruitment and outreach manager at Inner Temple; one of the Inns of Court. Also with me is regular co-host Kevin Poulter, who has been hosting the podcast in my absence and doing a very good job.

KP:

Thank you.

AA:

So here we are, we'll get straight into the topics because Kevin has a pressing date at the theatre to be going to.

AD:

Social mobility.

AA:

This man is an example of social mobility, he'd never even heard of a theatre until a couple of years ago.

KP:

Come on move on, move on. The clock's ticking guys.

AA:

Anyway, today I dare to criticise the Inns of Court on 'Legal Cheek' and I got in to...

AD:

Today, just today?

AA:

Well I've done it before but not on 'Legal Cheek', previously it was for the 'Guardian' and I got into trouble then too. There were lots of comments posted in response to my criticism saying that I'm no fan of the Inns of Court, despite the fact that they offer very generous scholarships and I suppose my 'beef' with the Inns is that they offer all

these scholarships, which they are very happy to disclose the amount of money that they offer for these scholarships, but they're not happy to disclose or in fact they won't disclose the revenue they get from their enormous property portfolios.

(Laughter)

AA:

Anthony, Anthony?

AD:

Well first of all I love that you seem to think that it's mandatory for us to reveal it; it's just simply not. We're members of organisations for one, as such we don't have to reveal. We're charitable organisations that give as much as we can in scholarships every year, and that of course is against all the other things that we do; we do education and training for student members, for established barristers, for pupils and we do outreach for schools, outreach for universities. We do a lot, not to mention the gardens that are open to the public, our massive estate which is as you quite well know an historical estate.

KP:

Plus there is a load of revenue as well from the numerous Charles Dickens period dramas and various other TV shows that are using the Inns, is that lucrative?

AD:

I mean yeah, that is part of our revenue and we try to put as much as we can into the scholarships but the issue is, Alex you have become somewhat one note. You're obsessed with the Inns and it's starting to show.

AA:

Wait a second.

AD:

Have you seen the show 'Revenge'? Do you know which show I mean?

(Phone Rings)

KP:

Okay so I'll take over. So what I want to know is...

AD:

Alex is getting his phone by the way.

KP:

To diffuse the situation, in terms of the scholarships, what are the criteria that apply? From what I've heard from the few people that I've spoken to, the scholarships tend to go to those who can already afford a career at the bar or can afford to get to where they need to get to. Is there a criteria in terms of social mobility?

AD:

That's simply just not the case. Inner and Middle Temple for example interview all applicants, that's right off the bat we interview all that apply. That would be a panel of barristers and normally quite senior members of the Inn, so including the judiciary. Mind you all of our awards as most you will find any scholarships are based on merit but need is taken into account for the vast majority of our awards. So need is very much part of our criteria for the level of funding you will receive. So you might win a small award but actually gain quite a substantial amount of money for that, or if you don't need the money, get quite a high level award but get a low level of funding.

KP:

What's the difference between, well what's the level of award...

AA:

The first point I think it should be expressed that Inner Temple are the only one, despite your harsh criticism Anthony, the Inner Temple are the only Inn to offer on a need basis. Middle temple does a bit, but not to the same extent as Inner Temple.

AD:

Well we vary, Inner and Middle take need very much into account in terms of the level of award offered, Lincolns and Greys have their own criteria and that would be for them to discuss; I'm not going to state their criteria.

AA:

Well I'll state it; they just do it purely on merit; Lincolns and Greys.

AD:

Inner and Middle will take financial circumstances in some ways into their process.

KP:

Is this a good thing?

AA:

Just going back to the question of award though Kevin.

KP:

Well the whole problem is that the bar is still seen as this aloof, a profession where you need the connections and all these things working together to get you even the remotest chance of becoming a barrister. The reality is that it's still all true today and even those who can afford to get there might see no chance of a scholarship on merit, who knows what that means, on merit if it's down to A Levels...

AA:

Merit is grades basically.

KP:

Well tell me people from poorer backgrounds, tend to have poorer grades.

AA:

Let me just summarise on this, because I've written loads of articles on this and this is one thing Inner Temple do well, when they're looking at scholarship applicants, they'll consider not just their A level grades or their University, but where they've come from; so how much they actually need it, if they're from a wealthy background or not. Whereas Lincolns and Gray's will just look purely at A levels and University and not take into account that you'll probably get worse grades if you went to a worse school.

AD:

I'm not going to actually speak for the other Inns, but I will say that interviewing all applicants allows us to take into account a whole diverse range of factors. For example you could be fantastic on paper, you could have that first and fantastic A levels but be quite poor in terms of your public speaking which is of course a huge requirement of the bar, you might not have the interpersonal abilities which once again is quite important; all of those things that you can then take into account in an interview.

AA:

And that's another thing with Inner; they're the only Inn that interviews...

AD:

Middle does as well.

AA:

Okay Inner and Middle, this is an important one for wannabe barristers though, Inner and Middle interview all applicants but Lincoln and Greys don't. So if you don't have top grades and you want to boost your chances, because you can only apply to one Inn for a scholarship, is that right?

AD:

That's correct.

AA:

Apply to Inner and Middle not the other two, on the other hand if you've got top grades apply to the other two; this is what Anthony Dursi says. No, no he doesn't.

AD:

We all have really different scholarships so you should look carefully at those, for example Greys is really, their pot might not seem as large as the others but they are by far the smallest Inn. So that's something to really assess when you're applying because a lot of students look at the pot of money and think "oh well, they have the largest pot of money, we'll go with them".

AA:

That's interesting.

AD:

There's a whole diverse range of factors to be considered.

KP:

How many people are interviewed each year, how many people apply for the scholarships?

AD:

In our careers guide we make them as transparent as possible, I think and this is really off the top of my head, the correct ones are online, I think that 380 applied maybe 320 actually went through to interviews, so maybe some dropped out at some point.

KP:

That's a lot of interviews.

AD:

Yeah doing 320 interviews takes a lot of effort from our members.

KP:

With all these 'Legal Cheek' listeners, there might be 324 next year.

(Laughter)

AD:

And then of those interviewed, I believe 101 were offered some sort of funding.

AA:

Okay so one in three chance.

AD:

Are offered some sort of funding, that might be quite a lower level.

KP:

Yeah but still, that's incredible.

AD:

It's also worth remembering that 97 percent of our senior and major scholars secured pupillage, 97 per cent, so it is really quite important to apply for a scholarship and it's also a big badge of honour. In effect you're being told by a senior group of practitioners that you stand a very positive chance.

AA:

That's a great endorsement to get at that stage. Can I just go back, let me be clear I think that the scholarships are good things but the revenue point, which I've tried to make on a number of occasions, I always get shouted down "how can you criticise the Inns" and it's almost as if you're not allowed to criticise the Inns, just let me finish on this, I just want to be clear about the point that I'm trying to make. As a journalist, if you're told that you get x amount in scholarships, 4.7 million, and you're not told how much revenue they generate then it's impossible to contextualise that 4.7 million scholarship figure. Now of course you're not legally obliged to make that revenue known and I can understand why you don't. I remember when I was back at 'Legal Week' doing stuff on this and I was criticised and asked why didn't I put the amount, the scholarship amount and I'd say that you know in some ways it's quite a meaningless amount if you can't contextualise with the revenue. Obviously if you were writing an article specifically for students saying what's on offer, you'd give the amount but it seems to me the Inns want to have their cake and eat it there. They want to broadcast the figures that their, you know like scholarships figures that they're happy to make public but not the revenue.

AD:

Well okay for one, I don't think you could ever say that the Inns want to broadcast things, I mean we haven't broadcasted much at all and that's in some ways the whole point of...

AA:

Okay not broadcast but making public and not making public.

AD:

Even apart from that, first of all we don't have to offer anything so I find it interesting that you're pushing on that topic when 4.7 million by any account is a very large sum of money...

AA:

No but Anthony come on we both know that if you didn't offer those scholarships then politically it would be impossible for the Inns because everyone would be saying that their getting all this massive property revenue and not even offering any scholarships, so of course you have to offer scholarships.

AD:

We wouldn't want to do that, we want the best and brightest to come and just as you've said before there's a huge financial imperative in order for the best and brightest to come.

KP:

Who cares? I know you care because you're a journalist, but in reality who cares? We know how much the College of Law make in a year, we know how much BPP make each year. How many...

AA:

But we don't know how much the Inns of Court make each year and we should know that comparison.

KP:

Who cares?

AA:

I think a lot of people would be interested in that information.

KP:

Well possibly but the people want to know if they can get a scholarship and how to get it and what's available.

AA:

But my point is if that revenue information was made available to the public, I think the Inns would come under pressure to have to offer more in scholarships.

KP:

Well how much pressure is BPP under?

AA:

We have no way of knowing if that figure is stingy or generous.

KP:

How much pressure is BPP under, to offer free places? None.

AA:

Well it might lessen the pressure for the Inns.

KP:

Well in which case who cares? It makes no difference.

AD:

I think two things on this...

KP:

Its curiosity and you know what happened to that.

(Laughter)

KP:

The cat got killed.

AD:

Two things; 1 the students pay a one off fee, Inner Temple it's £100 for life membership and through that you know there's massive scholarships not only for the bar course but for pupillage, there's internship awards and huge subsidisation for training activities all for £100 for the entire life membership. In some ways, regardless it's a really good deal. Secondly, apart from all the other things we do your heart wants scholarships which is absolutely fine and I think it's great to challenge the Inns I really do but we offer a huge amount of other things that you never do concentrate on like the huge amount of training we offer costs money.

AA:

I suppose my point is couldn't more money be made available in scholarships?

AD:

At this point I think if, I mean its well above my pay grade to even look at the financial figures, although they are very well audited on the shirt, but I do not think that is possible given our annual revenue. We give as much as possible and literally every year we try and offer as much, so we've given more every year for the last five years.

KP:

Increasing scholarships isn't going to increase the number of pupillages available, and increasing pupillages available isn't going to increase the number of tenancies available. So okay we've got a lot more pre qualified barristers.

AD:

Yeah so do you want everyone to go onto the bar course to get a full ride, I don't necessarily see what your end goal is.

AA:

I suppose I'm just in favour of transparency and I think generally where there's transparency it means greater fairness and this is just one of the areas in law that hasn't changed at all and it's conspicuous in its lack of transparency and I think that's often...

AD:

You're talking about the revenue of the Inns and I think to be honest that was never really your bed bug, it was the Inns as kind of dining clubs.

AA:

No that's actually not true, if you go back into that piece I wrote for the 'Guardian' that was the essence of my complaint, I think that if you look at, can you name one other institution in the UK legal world that doesn't have to make its revenue public, other than the Inns of Court?

KP:

Don't most partnerships? Unless they're limited partnerships.

AA:

Well all of them, I've got a magazine, I've got a copy of 'Legal Business' there and it's got the revenue figures for all the top 100 UK law firms.

KP:

Yeah because they're limited liability partnerships or companies; limited companies.

AD:

Membership organisations and most of those that aren't charities don't have to; in fact most businesses limited by guarantee don't have to. Small businesses if they're registering with companies house and aren't a charity, they don't have to.

KP:

What is the legal status of the Inns?

AD:

They're all different; Middle and Inner are these strange hybrids of Royal Peculiars founded by Royal Charter. They're not charities per se but they have charitable aims.

KP:

Like the College of Law?

(Laughter)

AA:

The college of Law is an interesting example of an organisation which has traded on its charitable status but actually operates very much like a business. I'm not suggesting the Inns operate like the College of Law, because they don't. It's just a good example of how the charity tag can be used.

AD:

We're not saying that we are, we're saying that we have charitable aims and spend our money in that respect, but my point of mentioning revenge that someone becomes obsessed with this one issue and it overtakes them and Emily VanCamp does it really well, as you do. As you can see by our student members and their comments on all of your articles and blogs so far, seem to be very happy with the Inns of Court and what they've offered and how much we care for them because we do. We give them a huge amount of pastoral care for not very much on their part.

AA:

Just before we move on to another point, it's true, most of the students are very happy and that's a good point. Just to address your point about the obsession before we move on, I think that's a little unfair given that I think I've written in the last year 2 articles that have 2 or 3 articles that have referenced the Inns of Court. So I don't think it's exactly an obsession.

AD:

Is it only 2 or 3?

AA:

I think I did the dinners' piece for the 'Guardian', I did a piece today which wasn't about the Inns for 'Legal Cheek' but it referenced them.

AD:

I think you've mentioned them before in terms of scholarships as well and in terms of, I mean in general about the bar you're not overwhelmingly positive.

AA:

No there is the stuff at the bar but not the Inns specifically.

AD:

Well yeah, but of course as institutions of the bar, and as one certainly seen through the entrance to the bar, we're going to look at your opinions and assess how accurate they are and I think a lot of it comes down to opinion, I think you're right to have that and I think it's good to challenge but challenging constructively and asking for ways that the Inns can do more, do things differently or things the bar in general can, is a good thing. Saying let's wipe them out, the Inns are pointless as I think was the general sentiment behind the first piece.

AA:

I think that's overstating them a little bit, I didn't say lets wipe them out.

(Laughter)

KP:

Join us later as the Inquiry into the behaviour of Alex Aldridge after this short interlude of interesting facts.

AA:

I suppose maybe we should. We were going to talk about the 'Occupy Justice' campaign because they've occupied a building actually just down the road from here, we'll touch on that a bit but I suppose this Inns thing is it an interesting conversation?

KP:

No.

AA:

Okay we're getting boring, so the 'Occupy Justice' campaign has...

KP:

Speaking as the voice of reason, I'm bored and I've got wine.

AA:

Okay we need to involve Kevin in this, so Kevin what do you think about the, just to recap the 'Occupy London' movement over Christmas they occupied a magistrates court on the corner of Old Street and Hoxton Street which is just about ten minutes from here and next week they're going to be holding mock trials of bankers with some law graduate volunteers and they've got some solicitors as well and a retired Judge apparently. Kevin what do you think about this? Good Idea?

KP:

Yeah of course it is; good entertainment I'd say, fantastic. I also heard that they're doing some sort of cabaret show.

AA:

They are although actually that was meant to be this Friday but they postponed it until next Friday.

KP:

Oh okay, well never mind.

AA:

But that should be a good night out actually.

KP:

I do in fact already have tickets to the theatre that night.

(Laughter)

AA:

But what about the actual mock trials?

KP:

I think it's a great idea, I think it's going to be, I don't know, I think there's a concern it might become a bit tongue-in-cheek.

AA:

I've heard your name banded around as a potential defendant.

(Laughter)

AA:

As a corporate lawyer you would sort of fit in to that category.

KP:

Possibly, but probably most of those people occupying would as well, from what I've heard, so I don't know. I did my own piece this week about bankers' bonuses.

AA:

Who was that for?

KP:

'London Loves Business', available on the website.

AA:

The flagging website; 'London Loves Business'. No it's a very successful up and coming website.

KP:

It certainly is; excellent columnists.

AA:

How long has it been going?

KP:

Since September. Anyway we're off topic. Yeah of course it's a good idea, hopefully it will give them a bit more publicity which again, they've been losing out on over the Christmas period. Let's see.

AD:

Is it right that they only have 3 weeks left?

KP:

Well I think there has been an agreement reached over the occupation of this actual courthouse with the landlord, so they've agreed to have 3 weeks so that they can set up these mock trials. Brilliant news, whether we're going to see a mask of some anonymous banker, I'm not sure how it's going to work.

AA:

I guess there just has to be some...

KP:

What we need to talk about is what happens after the event rather than what can we expect before it happens.

AA:

Ooh, I don't follow that.

KP:

Well we'll see how it happens.

AA:

Yeah sure, sure.

AD:

I just don't necessarily, I think it's quite interesting and probably engaging and quite fantastic but...

KP:

It gives them something to do.

(Laughter)

AD:

Who are they going to go after? I mean are they going to go after the heads of state, I don't quite understand it.

AA:

I think the idea is, I think the first one will be Royal Bank of Scotland, so I mean I suppose my take on it is that it's a great publicity stunt. Now I think if they do the trials well, it might score another PR coup, I think the perfect thing for them if they could get some law graduates, some jobless law graduates who have the legal training, and they've gone through the LPC or the BPTC and know the procedures.

KP:

Will they even be taking seriously?

AA:

Even if they're not it shows, it's kind of a constructive thing for these graduates to do in a way, because it's developing legal skills. I think where they can score a big own goal is if they go down the road of the 'freeman' movement, I don't know if you've seen this, the 'Freeman of the land'? These guys who Adam Wagner did a piece on, in the Human Rights blog, possibly the 'Guardian' but certainly 'Legal Bizzle', basically they're a group of guys who sort of have these quasi-legal beliefs and it sort of merges into spirituality and law.

KP:

A bit like the 'A Team'?

AA:

No a lot worse than the 'A team', a lot less professional. I think if those guys get involved I think they'll get sneered at. I tell you what the 'Occupy Times' which belongs to the Occupy protesters, they've produced a reasonable publication there and some people will go on to get jobs in magazines and newspapers so it's in a sense like; there's not that many jobs around at the moment, go down to Occupy, get some skills on the 'Occupy Times' and you could actually get a lift into a proper career. Similarly with the law, if they use jobless law graduates who are putting to use some of their skills I think the public will be sympathetic, but if they go for like the 'Freeman of the land' quasi-legal, quasi-mystical stuff they're going to get laughed at.

AD:

So you've gone to visit, how many people are actually occupying?

AA:

Seven, Seven over Christmas, or the Christmas period, but they've been really thinned out over Christmas.

AD:

Seven in a massive, massive courthouse.

AA:

It's not that massive, I mean it's fairly big I mean it's a lot bigger than this flat for example, but it's a magistrate's court so, over two floors.

AD:

Normally it's not seven though, it's like 15?

AA:

Well I suppose normally people don't live there but the reason why it's seven is because most of them have gone home for Christmas. So a lot of guys that I met there were foreign and so the others were away for Christmas and sort of gave it to the foreign guys and women to stick around over Christmas. But you know in fairness to them I think it's easy to pick holes in the 'Occupy' protesters but I think at least these guys are there. I went to meet them the other day and there was this South African guy and it was f***ing cold in there, the shivering.

KP:

Was it colder than in here?

(Laughter)

AA:

Similar levels of heat, that's why I'm always sympathetic with people who have heating problems.

KP:

Vivienne Westwood is welcome here at any time then.

AA:

But you know I just thought this guy he cares about this, and he's giving it a go. You know they've got to the trial, they went to a hearing in Clarksenwell County Court the other day to see if they could stay because the owner of the building, who was a property developer wanted them out, they did a very pragmatic deal with the owner to get 3 more weeks and they've also cleaned it up a lot; they're no thugs.

KP:

What I want to know is if they'll be paying these law graduates the minimum wage for the work they'll be doing on these mock trials.

AD:

Unpaid internships.

KP:

Absolutely, practice what you preach is what I'm saying.

AA:

How can they, let's not be too harsh. Also they haven't been preaching that, I boxed myself into a corner foolishly by writing an article on unpaid internships. Well maybe not foolishly.

AD:

The QC involved should certainly get paid his normal wage.

AA:

Well it's not a QC, it's a retired judge.

AD:

But isn't there a QC involved?

AA:

Not with the 'Occupy Justice', there has been but that's been pro-bono, John Cooper QC and a few others.

KP:

Just to be applauded pro-bono is one thing, using law students for cheap labour is quite another.

AA:

But to be honest I think you bringing that into this is a bit unfair.

KP:

I'm only being controversial, for a change.

AA:

Well let's see, there you go. They're trying to put something together, they've got 3 weeks to do it, they could really f**k it up, they could do it well.

KP:

Well they've got 'Legal Cheek' on their side obviously to promote this, who else have they got? Is this going to be a public event, is it going to be televised? Who's going to see this?

AA:

They've got 'Vision T.V', a start up internet T.V company which is going to be recording it.

KP:

Is this just for a bit of their own self esteem; is it just to keep them occupied?

AA:

In a sense it is, but is that such a bad thing? If people come out of these trials and they've improved their legal skills and it helps them to get pupillages or training contracts, is that really such a bad thing?

KP:

Is that the right reason?

AD:

Do you think it will help?

AA:

It would I think for legal aid firms and legal aid sets, I think for City law firms and I made this clear in the 'LegalCheek' blog, it would be disastrous. City law firms wouldn't like that.

KP:

Is that the right reason for a law student to do it? Work experience?

AA:

Oh F**k it, everyone's got to get ahead in this world. You can't win with you Kevin.

KP:

Well I'm quite happy here in my ivory tower.

AD:

It's quite depressing isn't it, that a movement trying to change the face of, or structure of our system only has seven members.

AA:

No but that's incorrect, I've been misleading in that respect. Seven members stayed over the Christmas period, one of the reasons was so that they didn't mess it up, they're really precious about that place. They have done a lot of cleaning and the 'Occupy' movement is questionable in many ways but also I think that they do have some real positives but there's f***ing loads of them, there's loads of these people.

KP:

Language Alex.

AA:

I'm trying to make it edgier. Anyway just to finish off, we've touched on this briefly off mic, there was a student which Legal Week hosted 'Occupy the Inns' who launched a campaign, admittedly short lived, to occupy the Inns of Court. Anthony as someone who works for the Inner Temple what did you think of this campaign?

AD:

I imagined the massive tents pitched up in the Inner Temple gardens and them coming out in their 3 piece suits, but to be honest it's a bit sad that they feel forced to occupy the Inns when all we do is in some ways positive things for them. If they have a problem with the profession then that's absolutely fine, they might be disenfranchised they didn't get pupillage and bring that up, have a go at the profession for that, but the Inns? I feel that they're trying to grasp on to anything institutional and they find the Inns as the perfect excuse to do that but I don't think that the Inns are there best focus.

AA:

Do you think that anything like that could work?

KP:

To do what, create more pupillages? Of course not, but that's what people want, they want more jobs, of course it won't work, you can't just create jobs.

AD:

I still don't see the purpose of it, give me a purpose.

AA:

Okay so with those hard headed words from Kevin and Anthony.

KP:

Come on, we're living in 2012 now, we've got an Olympics to pay for.

AA:

Which you're appearing at Kevin, I believe? How did the auditions go?

KP:

Not yet come to auditions, with Danny Boyle no less, but not yet confirmed so watch this space. It may interfere with my obligations to 'Legal Cheek'.

AA:

Oh, tell that Boyle where to go, get your priorities straight. Well both of you it's been a great pleasure and we'll see you next week, or you'll hear us next week.

KP:

Nice glasses by the way.

AA:

What? Oh yeah Kevin got me some glasses as a Christmas present so.

KP:

Not spectacles.

AA:

Yeah glasses you can hear them, like chink.

(Rattle of glasses)

AA:

I didn't get him a present though, but I'm going to try.

AD:

You will next week, you will.

(All say goodbye)