

**You are due to take up your position as the new Chair of the AJTC on 1 September 2009. What attracted you to the role and why did you apply for the job?**

The remit of the AJTC is wide and important and we face difficult and exciting challenges. It will be an immense privilege to lead an organisation focused on improving the machinery for resolving problems between government and individuals. This goes to the heart of debates about democratic renewal and the trust and confidence of citizens.

I have been lucky to have enjoyed a varied career across public, private and voluntary sectors. Three themes have dominated - wanting to make a difference, de-mystifying the law and ensuring that the interests of consumers and users are taken on board. The AJTC – uniquely a new body with a well-respected history – draws these themes together and enables me to put my own experience to good use.

**At the end of June 2009 you stepped down from your position as the Information Commissioner, a position you held for nearly 7 years. What was your experience there like?**

It was a heavy, but very rewarding, responsibility to be the independent regulator for freedom of information and data protection. There were common types of activity under both headings – promoting good practice, ruling on complaints and taking enforcement action. FOI came fully into force during my time, but I also wanted to revitalise the approach towards data protection and privacy. Both topics were very broad in their impact, were very controversial and high-profile at times and generated new issues almost weekly. We had to deal with the entire public sector and many commercial bodies, especially in the fast-changing IT world. You cannot please everyone all the time, but it was vital to listen and make reasoned judgements – often by reference to explicit public interest considerations. The job also brought home the fundamental importance of good two-way communications with government, the media and many stakeholders.

**Prior to the ICO, you were the first Director of Public Policy at Clifford Chance. What stands out when you reflect on your 10 years there?**

A new and niche role within the world's largest law firm suited me very well. My task was to help the firm and its clients understand what was happening inside Whitehall, Westminster and Brussels. Lawyers traditionally are much better at dealing with existing law than anticipating new laws and getting to grips with the processes of policy development and law-making. I was able to gather intelligence, analyse what was going on, consider the implications and make constructive contributions. It was stimulating to become the temporary expert on a great variety of embryonic developments – ranging from the Private Finance Initiative and the Woolf reforms through to Human Rights and Limited Liability Partnerships. It was a firm where globalisation became a reality and where I got a much better understanding of how businesses in competitive markets must strive to satisfy their customers.

**You've also worked as a Citizens Advice Bureau lawyer, for the National Consumer Council (now Consumer Focus) and at the Office of Fair Trading. How do you think these experiences will inform your work at the AJTC?**

Back to my themes of making a difference, de-mystifying the law and the consumer/user focus. The CAB highlights the isolation and anxiety of many people when dealing with bureaucracies and the law. NCC provided the opportunity to push through worthwhile changes. I was heavily involved in changes to small claims in the county court, setting up the first private-sector Ombudsman schemes and pushing the Plain English message. I was also the consumer representative on the Civil Justice Review where I championed the Access to Justice proposals. As Director of Consumer Affairs at the OFT, I had to bring a strategic approach to the regulation of consumer credit and debt, misleading advertising and various specific markets ranging from funerals to timeshare. All three organisations benefitted from independent status and reputations for integrity, responsibility and evidence-based approaches. I tried to bring the same values to the ICO. In a nutshell – and this is vital to AJTC – credibility is everything.

**What do you see as the current issues for the AJTC and the administrative justice system?**

I will listen and learn and not jump to early conclusions. There has been much upheaval in recent years, with much unfinished business, and the “administrative justice system” is not yet adequately recognised as such. Many questions flow from its two defining features – most people are not legally represented and they are dealing with the weight of government. How far are the system and its various components designed and operated for that reality, rather than just adjusting for it? I favour identifying and publicising good practice which can be easily transplanted to other areas, but not being frightened to speak out when that is necessary. More specifically, I will want to find out how the Tribunal reforms are working in practice and how the various risks are being handled. I am sure there is also plenty to be done with first-instance decision-making and review inside public bodies. I am very encouraged by AJTC's current projects on the administrative justice Landscape and the Principles for the system.

**What will your early priorities be as the new AJTC Chair?**

Tony Newton has done a magnificent job leading the Council, especially through its re-constitution as the AJTC. I am very keen to build on that legacy and capitalise on the Council's reputation. Beyond that, the priorities will be those of the Council as a whole, not mine. But I do know that the top priority must be to have priorities. This emphasises the importance of a genuinely strategic approach. It is vital for an official body with a wide remit and limited resources to make choices and to stick to them. At the ICO our Strategy was summed up as aiming to be “Selective to be Effective”. I am all too aware that the hardest part can be saying No, but this is vital to harnessing credibility and reputation, being taken seriously and ensuring that we make a difference.

**Richard Thomas**

Administrative Justice and Tribunals Council, Chairman	2009 –
Consumers Association, Deputy Chairman	2009 –
Whitehall & Industry Group, Management Board	2008 -
-----	
Information Commissioner	2002 – 2009
Clifford Chance, Director of Public Policy	1992 – 2002
Office of Fair Trading, Director of Consumer Affairs	1986 – 1992
National Consumer Council, Legal Officer & Head of Public Affairs	1979 – 1986
Citizens Advice Bureau Legal Service, Salaried Lawyer	1974 - 1979
Freshfields, Trainee & Assistant Solicitor	1971– 1974