

# Wally Oppal

Attorney-General for British Columbia and  
Minister Responsible for Multiculturalism

CLASS OF 1966



When the chief law officer for the Province of British Columbia talks about “curing” criminals instead of jailing them, you can bet the game has changed. “We know right now that our present system isn’t working,” Wally Oppal admits frankly. “We know from our experience that people come out worse when they’ve been in jail. If [crimes are] committed by people who are addicted to drugs or alcohol, or are suffering from mental illnesses and they keep committing offences, [it’s] because we don’t ever get to the causes of their aberrant behaviour. We have to start treating them.”

Oppal’s commitment to social justice has a long history. Born in Vancouver and brought up in a small logging town west of Duncan, Oppal was raised by early immigrants from India who “were not allowed to be citizens until 1947.” It is not lost on him that the son of immigrants who couldn’t vote is now the top lawmaker in the province, and he has spent his career righting social wrongs and working to make communities inclusive of everyone they’re meant to serve.

After high school, Oppal did a stint as a radio announcer, and was invited by American scouts to try out for pro baseball. Told “don’t quit your day job,” Oppal realized he still hadn’t decided on one, and so entered university with the view of taking either law or medicine. Upon discovering a dislike for the physical sciences, his decision was made. Oppal worked in lumber mills and logging camps to put himself through university. His first job as a lawyer, with Thompson and McConnell, saw him in court almost every day. “I landed a couple of very high-profile murder cases,” he recalls, “so that helped me get more work. I practised criminal law in the ’70s and early ’80s and that was sort of the heyday of the criminal lawyer.”

Being a judge was never part of the plan.

But in 1981, Oppal was appointed to the County Court of British Columbia, in 1985 to the BC Supreme Court and in 2003 to the BC Court of Appeal. “If someone had told me when I was in law school that I would go to the Supreme Court, the Court of Appeal, and be Attorney-General, I would have thought it would be easier to go to the moon,” he laughs. “I just wanted to be a lawyer and [that] whole task seemed pretty daunting to me.” Lloyd McKenzie, Allan McEachern, Al Mackoff, Pat Dohm and Sam Toy acted as mentors to the new judge, and looking back he says, “It was a fascinating job.”

Oppal describes the task of policy-making as “more important and difficult now than it was 20, 30 or 40 years ago ... because the public scrutinizes you more than ever, the media is more vigilant than ever.” Realizing early in his career that education was the key to earning the public’s trust, Oppal became a vocal proponent of public legal education, and uses every media opportunity and talk show invitation to make the criminal and civil justice systems more comprehensible to a broad audience. More formally, he is President of the Law Courts Education Society of BC and a permanent group leader of the Advocacy course with the Continuing Legal Education Society.

Oppal also points to the growing need for skilled workers in BC’s booming economy as a key area of focus for his office. “Our job,” he says, “is to make sure that there’s going to be enough people going into the medical profession, nursing, the teaching profession, all of which are undergoing tremendous demographic changes.” Another primary focus is, of course, multiculturalism. “Fifty-five percent of the City of Vancouver is now a visible minority,” he quips, “which gives brand new meaning to that term, I guess. Twenty-three percent of the province is now a

visible minority. Richmond is 60 percent Asian. We in government and all our institutions, the courts and policing, have to adjust the way we do business. We have to tell... people who come from Southeast Asia, from the Middle East, from China, India, South America, how they can participate in our democracy.” He cites the example of trying to explain Canada’s criminal justice system to a new immigrant from Vietnam: “How do we tell that person that our police can be trusted and the courts are independent, that lawyers are independent, that you don’t have to pay money to the police when you’re arrested, or that the lawyers are there to help you?”

Oppal’s expectation that newcomers adapt to the Canadian legal system is matched by his insistence that the system serve its

citizens. “I would like to see a community court opened,” he states. “There are 27 such courts in the US [that take] a community approach, an overlapping approach where the health authorities get involved and assess to see whether [offenders] can be cured.” The project has the support of police chiefs and police and probation officers, MPs, MLAs and the Premier, and Oppal is hoping to see the pilot centre open this year. “We’re already lining up the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority [and] we’ve got a facility ... the Remand Centre on Powell Street.” He credits the Street Crime Working Group with the initial recommendation for the project, and says, “I’ve really embraced it and run with it. I know it’s sort of a cliché but ... I think maybe I can help some people.”

## Judith Bellis

General Counsel and Director, Judicial Affairs  
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CLASS OF 1980



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“One of these things is not like the others; one of these things just doesn’t belong...” Judith Bellis sings behind the closed door of her DOJ office in Ottawa. It’s an old *Sesame Street* ditty, and Bellis’s response to being told she’s been selected as a subject for this feature. “I cannot strictly speaking be characterized as a lawmaker,” she says, “although I know a great deal about how laws are actually made.” Outspoken, a formidable intellect, and one of the top lawyers for the top lawyer in the country, Bellis knows more about how laws get made than most people in Canada.

“It starts with issue identification and consultations with all of the interest groups and stakeholders,” Bellis explains, “—this is when it’s done properly. In my world, that means the legal community but most significantly the judiciary itself. Discussions with the judiciary around policy development have to be very carefully structured to avoid any suggestion or perception that the judges are in some way participating in the policy development or negotiating.” She adds, “I think what is not well understood — because it’s very much a hidden part of the process — is the way in which policy is developed and put forward through the cabinet process, and the time and energy that goes into that exercise ... in order to not