



The Rt Hon Lord Mackay of Clashfern at Northumbria University

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Former Lord Chancellor honoured by Northumbria University

The Rt Hon Lord Mackay of Clashfern has received an honorary degree from Northumbria University, Newcastle, for his contribution to the UK judicial system.

James Peter Hymers Mackay was born an only child in 1927. His father was a railway porter from the Highland hamlet of Clashfern in Sutherland and an active elder in the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. Lord Mackay was brought up in a family in which the strict discipline of that church was

observed, and the importance of Bible Study and observance of the Sabbath was a way of life.

Lord Mackay won a scholarship to George Heriot's, a Scottish independent school founded in 1628 based in Edinburgh's Old Town. From there he studied mathematics and physics at the University of Edinburgh receiving a joint MA in 1948.

He taught mathematics for two years at the University of St Andrews before moving to Trinity College, Cambridge, on a scholarship, graduating in 1952 with a BA in Mathematics. By then Lord Mackay had come to realise his future lay not in mathematics but in the law. He returned to Edinburgh University and graduated in Law with distinction in 1955.

Over the next 15 years, Lord Mackay ascended the ranks of the Scottish Bar, becoming a Sheriff Principal, then Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Advocates and, in 1976, its Dean - the Scottish Bar's leading role.

In 1979, Lord Mackay received a telephone call from Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher inviting him to accept the position of Lord Advocate, the chief legal officer of the government and crown in Scotland. By doing so he also became a Life Peer, taking the title Lord Mackay of Clashfern in honour of his father. As Lord Advocate, James was head of the Scottish prosecution service; a law officer of the UK; and, from time to time, represented the UK Government in the European Court of Justice and in the Appellate Committee of the House of Lords.

In 1984, Lord Mackay was appointed as a judge to the Court of Session and the High Court of Justiciary (respectively Scotland's supreme civil and criminal courts). The following year he was made Lord of Appeal in Ordinary of the House of Lords, then the UK's highest court of appeal.

An already distinguished career was to become unique when, in 1987, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher invited Lord Mackay to become Lord Chancellor of Great Britain and he was to become the longest continuously serving Lord Chancellor in the 20th century.

Many other honours have followed, including his appointment as a Knight of the Thistle in 1999 – equivalent to the Order of the Garter in England.

Lord Mackay has continued to be active in the House of Lords, frequently participating in debates. In 2007 he was appointed as Lord Clerk Register of Scotland and ex officio Keeper of the Signet, the seal of the sovereign in Scotland.

Speaking of his Honorary Degree, Lord Mackay said: “It’s a tremendous honour to receive my honorary degree from Northumbria University. It is particularly poignant for me because I awarded the University’s Chancellor Baroness Grey-Thompson her degree from Heriot Watt University, when I was Chancellor there. I’m delighted to be associated with the students and alumni here at Northumbria University’s Law School and I’m looking forward to working with them to help develop the legal profession.”

Northumbria University has been awarded the Queen’s Anniversary Prize for Higher and Further Education – the highest form of national recognition open to a UK academic or vocational institution – for the outstanding community work of its Student Law Office. The Student Law Office has managed more than 5,500 enquiries, represented more than 2,300 clients and secured over £1 million on their behalf since 2008.

Northumbria is a research-rich, business-focused, professional university with a global reputation for academic excellence. To find out more about our courses go to www.northumbria.ac.uk

If you have a media enquiry please contact our Media and Communications team at media.communications@northumbria.ac.uk or call [0191 227 4571](tel:01912274571).

Contacts



Rik Kendall

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

Business and Law / Arts, Design & Social Sciences

rik.kendall@northumbria.ac.uk

07923 382339



Andrea Slowey

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

Engineering and Environment / Health and Life Sciences

andrea.slowey@northumbria.ac.uk

07708 509436



James Fox

Press Contact

Student Communications Manager

james2.fox@northumbria.ac.uk



Kelly Elliott

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

kelly2.elliott@northumbria.ac.uk



Rachael Barwick

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

rachael.barwick@northumbria.ac.uk

07377422415



Ruth Lognonne

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

ruth.lognonne@northumbria.ac.uk

07971274253



Gemma Brown

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

gemma6.brown@northumbria.ac.uk