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Canons of Judicial Ethics

American Bar Association

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CANONS OF JUDICIAL ETHICS *

ANCIENT PRECEDENTS

"And I charged your judges at that time, saying Hear the causes between your brethren, and judge righteously between every man and his brother, and the stranger that is with him.

"Ye shall not respect persons in judgment; but ye shall hear the small as well as the great; ye shall not be afraid of the face of man; for the judgment is God's; and the cause that is too hard for you, bring it unto me, and I will hear it."—*Deuteronomy*, I, 16-17.

"Thou shalt not wrest judgment; thou shalt not respect persons, neither take a gift; for a gift doth blind the eyes of the wise, and pervert the words of the righteous."—*Deuteronomy*, XVI, 19.

"We will not make any justiciaries, constables, sheriffs or bailiffs, but from those who understand the law of the realm and are well disposed to observe it."—*Magna Charta*, XLV.

"Judges ought to remember that their office is *jus dicere* not *jus dare*; to interpret law, and not to make law, or give law." . . .

"Judges ought to be more learned than witty; more reverend than plausible; and more advised than confident. Above all things, integrity is their portion and proper virtue." . . .

"Patience and gravity of hearing is an essential part of justice; and an over speaking judge is no well-tuned cymbal. It is no grace to a judge first to find that which he might have heard in due time from the Bar, or to show quickness of conceit in cutting off evidence or counsel too short; or to prevent information by questions though pertinent.

"The place of justice is a hallowed place; and therefore not only the Bench, but the foot pace and precincts and purprise thereof ought to be preserved without scandal and corruption." . . .
—*Bacon's Essay "of Judicature."*

PREAMBLE

In addition to the Canons for Professional Conduct of Lawyers which it has formulated and adopted, the American Bar Association, mindful that the character and conduct of a judge should never be objects of indifference, and that declared ethical

* These Canons have been adopted by the American Bar Association. They are reprinted here by request. A proposal to appoint a committee to review and draft a set of Canons of Judicial Ethics for the North Dakota Judiciary was approved at the last meeting of the North Dakota Judicial Council. A report of this action may be found in the Bench and Bar section of this issue of the NORTH DAKOTA LAW REVIEW.

standards tend to become habits of life, deems it desirable to set forth its views respecting these principles which should govern the personal practice of members of the judiciary in the administration of their office. The Association accordingly adopts the following Canons, the spirit of which it suggests as a proper guide and reminder for judges, and as indicating what the people have a right to expect from them.

1. RELATIONS OF THE JUDICIARY

The assumption of the office of judge casts upon the incumbent duties in respect to his personal conduct which concern his relation to the state and its inhabitants, the litigants before him, the principles of law, the practitioners of law in his court, and the witnesses, jurors and attendants who aid him in the administration of its functions.

2. THE PUBLIC INTEREST.

Courts exist to promote justice, and thus to serve the public interest. Their administration should be speedy and careful. Every judge should at all times be alert in his rulings and in the conduct of the business of the court, so far as he can, to make it useful to litigants and to the community. He should avoid unconsciously falling into the attitude of mind that the litigants are made for the courts instead of the courts for the litigants.

3. CONSTITUTIONAL OBLIGATIONS.

It is the duty of all judges in the United States to support the federal Constitution and that of the state whose laws they administer; in so doing, they should fearlessly observe and apply fundamental limitations and guarantees.

4. AVOIDANCE OF IMPROPRIETY.

A judge's official conduct should be free from impropriety and the appearance of impropriety; he should avoid infractions of law; and his personal behavior, not only upon the Bench and in the performance of judicial duties, but also in his every day life, should be beyond reproach.

5. ESSENTIAL CONDUCT.

A judge should be temperate, attentive, patient, impartial, and, since he is to administer the law and apply it to the facts, he should be studious of the principles of the law and diligent in endeavoring to ascertain the facts.

6. INDUSTRY.

A judge should exhibit an industry and application commensurate with the duties imposed upon him.

7. PROMPTNESS.

A judge should be prompt in the performance of his judicial duties, recognizing that the time of litigants, jurors and attorneys is of value and that habitual lack of punctuality on his part justifies dissatisfaction with the administration of the business of the court.

8. COURT ORGANIZATION.

A judge should organize the court with a view to the prompt and convenient dispatch of its business and he should not tolerate abuses and neglect by clerks, and other assistants who are sometimes prone to presume too much upon his good natured acquiescence by reason of friendly association with him.

It is desirable too, where the judicial system permits, that he should cooperate with other judges of the same court, and in other courts, as members of a single judicial system, to promote the more satisfactory administration of justice.

9. CONSIDERATION FOR JURORS AND OTHERS

A judge should be considerate of jurors, witnesses and others in attendance upon the court.

10. COURTESY AND CIVILITY.

A judge should be courteous to counsel, especially to those who are young and inexperienced, and also to all others appearing or concerned in the administration of justice in the court.

He should also require, and, so far as his power extends, enforce on the part of clerks, court officers and counsel civility and courtesy to the court and to jurors, witnesses, litigants and others having business in the court.

11. UNPROFESSIONAL CONDUCT OF ATTORNEYS AND COUNSEL.

A judge should utilize his opportunities to criticize and correct unprofessional conduct of attorneys and counsellors, brought to his attention; and, if adverse comment is not a sufficient corrective, should send the matter at once to the proper investigating and disciplinary authorities.

12. APPOINTEES OF THE JUDICIARY AND THEIR COMPENSATION.

Trustees, receivers, masters, referees, guardians and other persons appointed by a judge to aid in the administration of justice

should have the strictest probity and impartiality and should be selected with a view solely to their character and fitness. The power of making such appointments should not be exercised by him for personal or partisan advantage. He should not permit his appointments to be controlled by others than himself. He should also avoid nepotism and undue favoritism in his appointments.

While not hesitating to fix or approve just amounts, he should be most scrupulous in granting or approving compensation for the services or charges of such appointees to avoid excessive allowances, whether or not excepted to or complained of. He cannot rid himself of this responsibility by the consent of counsel.

13. KINSHIP OR INFLUENCE.

A judge should not act in a controversy where a near relative is a party; he should not suffer his conduct to justify the impression that any person can improperly influence him or unduly enjoy his favor, or that he is affected by the kinship, rank, position or influence of any party or other person.

14. INDEPENDENCE.

A judge should not be swayed by partisan demands, public clamor or considerations of personal popularity or notoriety, nor be apprehensive of unjust criticism.

15. INTERFERENCE IN CONDUCT OF TRIAL.

A judge may properly intervene in a trial of a case to promote expedition, and prevent unnecessary waste of time, or to clear up some obscurity, but he should bear in mind that his undue interference, impatience, or participation in the examination of witnesses, or a severe attitude on his part toward witnesses, especially those who are excited or terrified by the unusual circumstances of a trial, may tend to prevent the proper presentation of the cause, or the ascertainment of the truth in respect thereto.

Conversation between the judge and counsel in court is often necessary, but the judge should be studious to avoid controversies which are apt to obscure the merits of the dispute between litigants and lead to its unjust disposition. In addressing counsel, litigants, or witnesses, he should avoid a controversial manner or tone.

He should avoid interruptions of counsel in their arguments except to clarify his mind as to their positions, and he should not be tempted to the unnecessary display of learning or a premature judgment.

16. EX PARTE APPLICATIONS.

A judge should discourage *ex parte* hearings of applications for injunctions and receiverships where the order may work detriment to absent parties; he should act upon such *ex parte* applications only where the necessity for quick action is clearly shown; if this be demonstrated, then he should endeavor to counteract the effect of the absence of opposing counsel by a scrupulous cross-examination and investigation as to the facts and the principles of law on which the application is based, granting relief only when fully satisfied that the law permits it and the emergency demands it. He should remember that an injunction is a limitation upon the freedom of action of defendants and should not be granted lightly or inadvisedly. One applying for such relief must sustain the burden of showing clearly its necessity and this burden is increased in the absence of the party whose freedom of action is sought to be restrained even though only temporarily.

17. EX PARTE COMMUNICATIONS.

A judge should not permit private interviews, arguments or communications designed to influence his judicial action, where interests to be affected thereby are not represented before him, except in cases where provision is made by law for *ex parte* application.

While the conditions under which briefs of argument are to be received are largely matters of local rule or practice, he should not permit the contents of such brief presented to him to be concealed from opposing counsel. Ordinarily all communications of counsel to the judge intended or calculated to influence action should be made known to opposing counsel.

18. CONTINUANCES.

Delay in the administration of justice is a common cause of complaint; counsel are frequently responsible for this delay. A judge, without being arbitrary or forcing cases unreasonably or unjustly to trial when unprepared, to the detriment of the parties, may well endeavor to hold counsel to a proper appreciation of their duties to the public interest, to their own clients, and to the adverse party and his counsel, so as to enforce due diligence in the dispatch of business before the court.

19. JUDICIAL OPINIONS.

In disposing of controverted cases, a judge should indicate the reasons for his action in an opinion showing that he has not

disregarded or overlooked serious arguments of counsel. He thus shows his full understanding of the case, avoids the suspicion of arbitrary conclusion, promotes confidence in his intellectual integrity and may contribute useful precedent to the growth of the law.

It is desirable that Courts of Appeal in reversing cases and granting new trials should so indicate their views on questions of law argued before them and necessarily arising in the controversy that upon the new trial counsel may be aided to avoid the repetition of erroneous positions of law and shall not be left in doubt by the failure of the court to decide such questions.

But the volume of reported decisions is such and is so rapidly increasing that in writing opinions which are to be published judges may well take this fact into consideration, and curtail them accordingly, without substantially departing from the principles stated above.

It is of high importance that judges constituting a court of last resort should use effort and self-restraint to promote the solidarity of conclusion and the consequent influence of judicial decision. A judge should not yield to pride of opinion or value more highly his individual reputation than that of the court to which he should be loyal. Except in case of conscientious difference of opinion on fundamental principle, dissenting opinions should be discouraged in courts of last resort.

20. INFLUENCE OF DECISIONS UPON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE LAW.

A judge should be mindful that his duty is the application of general law to particular instances, that ours is a government of law and not of men, and that he violates his duty as a minister of justice under such a system if he seeks to do what he may personally consider substantial justice in a particular case and disregards the general law as he knows it to be binding on him. Such action may become a precedent unsettling accepted principles and may have detrimental consequences beyond the immediate controversy. He should administer his office with a due regard to the integrity of the system of the law itself, remembering that he is not a depository of arbitrary power, but a judge under the sanction of law.

21. IDIOSYNCRASIES AND INCONSISTENCIES.

Justice should not be moulded by the individual idiosyncrasies of those who administer it. A judge should adopt the usual and

expected method of doing justice, and not seek to be extreme or peculiar in his judgments, or spectacular or sensational in the conduct of the court. Though vested with discretion in the imposition of mild or severe sentences he should not compel persons brought before him to submit to some humiliating act or discipline of his own devising, without authority of law, because he thinks it will have a beneficial corrective influence.

In imposing sentence he should endeavor to conform to a reasonable standard of punishment and should not seek popularity or publicity either by exceptional severity or undue leniency.

22. REVIEW.

In order that a litigant may secure the full benefit of the right of review accorded him by law, a trial judge should scrupulously grant to the defeated party opportunity to present the questions arising upon the trial exactly as they arose, were presented, and decided, by full and fair bill of exceptions or otherwise; any failure in this regard on the part of the judge is peculiarly worthy of condemnation because the wrong done may be irremediable.

23. LEGISLATION.

A judge has exceptional opportunity to observe the operation of statutes, especially those relating to practice, and to ascertain whether they tend to impede the just disposition of controversies; and he may well contribute to the public interest by advising those having authority to remedy defects of procedure, of the result of his observation and experience.

24. INCONSISTENT OBLIGATIONS.

A judge should not accept inconsistent duties; nor incur obligations, pecuniary or otherwise, which will in any way interfere or appear to interfere with his devotion to the expeditious and proper administration of his official functions.

25. BUSINESS PROMOTIONS AND SOLICITATIONS FOR CHARITY.

A judge should avoid giving ground for reasonable suspicion that he is utilizing the power or prestige of his office to persuade or coerce others to patronize or contribute, either to the success of private business ventures, or to charitable enterprises. He should therefore, not enter into such private business, or pursue such a course of conduct, as would justify such suspicion, nor use the power of his office or the influence of his name to promote the business interests of others; he should not solicit for charities, nor

should he enter into any business relations which, in the normal course of events reasonably to be expected, might bring his personal interest into conflict with the impartial performance of his official duties.

26. PERSONAL INVESTMENTS AND RELATIONS.

A judge should abstain from making personal investments in enterprises which are apt to be involved in litigation in the court; and, after his accession to the Bench, he should not retain such investments previously made, longer than a period sufficient to enable him to dispose of them without serious loss. It is desirable that he should, so far as reasonably possible, refrain from all relations which would normally tend to arouse the suspicion that such relations warp or bias his judgment, or prevent his impartial attitude of mind in the administration of his judicial duties.

He should not utilize information coming to him in a judicial capacity for purposes of speculation; and it detracts from public confidence in his integrity and the soundness of his judicial judgment for him at any time to become a speculative investor upon the hazard of a margin.

27. EXECUTORSHIPS AND TRUSTEESHIPS.

While a judge is not disqualified from holding executorships or trusteeships, he should not accept or continue to hold any fiduciary or other position if the holding of it would interfere or seem to interfere with the proper performance of his judicial duties, or if the business interests of those represented require investments in enterprises that are apt to come before him judicially, or to be involved in questions of law to be determined by him.

28. PARTISAN POLITICS.

While entitled to entertain his personal views of political questions, and while not required to surrender his rights or opinions as a citizen, it is inevitable that suspicion of being warped by political bias will attach to a judge who becomes the active promoter of the interests of one political party as against another. He should avoid making political speeches, making or soliciting payment of assessments or contributions to party funds, the public endorsement of candidates for political office and participation in conventions.

He should neither accept nor retain a place on any party committee nor act as party leader, nor engage generally in partisan activities.

29. SELF-INTEREST.

A judge should abstain from performing or taking part in any judicial act in which his personal interests are involved. If he has personal litigation in the court of which he is judge, he need not resign his judgeship on that account, but he should, of course, refrain from any judicial act in such a controversy.

30. CANDIDACY FOR OFFICE.

A candidate for judicial position should not make or suffer others to make for him, promises of conduct in office which appeal to cupidity or prejudices of the appointing or electing power; he should not announce in advance his conclusions of law on disputed issues to secure class support, and he should do nothing while a candidate to create the impression that if chosen, he will administer his office with bias, partiality or improper discrimination.

While holding a judicial position he should not become an active candidate either at a party primary or at a general election for any office other than a judicial office. If a judge should decide to become a candidate for any office not judicial, he should resign in order that it cannot be said that he is using the power or prestige of his judicial position to promote his own candidacy or the success of the party.

If a judge becomes a candidate for any political office, he should refrain from all conduct which might tend to arouse reasonable suspicion that he is using the power or prestige of his judicial position to promote his candidacy or the success of his party.

He should not permit others to do anything in behalf of his candidacy which would reasonably lead to such suspicion.

31. PRIVATE LAW PRACTICE.

In many states the practice of law by one holding judicial position is forbidden. In superior courts of general jurisdiction, it should never be permitted. In inferior courts in some states, it is permitted because the county or municipality is not able to pay adequate living compensation for a competent judge. In such cases one who practices law is in a position of great delicacy and must be scrupulously careful to avoid conduct in his practice whereby he utilizes or seems to utilize his judicial position to further his professional success.

He should not practice in the court where he is a judge, even when presided over by another judge, or appear therein for himself in any controversy.

If forbidden to practice law, he should refrain from accepting any professional employment while in office.

He may properly act as an arbitrator or lecture upon or instruct in law, or write upon the subject, and accept compensation therefor, if such course does not interfere with the due performance of his judicial duties, and is not forbidden by some positive provision of law.

32. GIFTS AND FAVORS.

A judge should not accept any presents or favors from litigants, or from lawyers practising before him or from others whose interests are likely to be submitted to him for judgment.

33. SOCIAL RELATIONS.

It is not necessary to the proper performance of judicial duty that a judge should live in retirement and seclusion; it is desirable that, so far as reasonable attention to the completion of his work will permit, he continue to mingle in social intercourse, and that he should not discontinue his interest in or appearance at meetings of members of the Bar. He should, however, in pending or prospective litigation before him be particularly careful to avoid such action as may reasonably tend to awaken suspicion that his social or business relations or friendships constitute an element in influencing his judicial conduct.

34. A SUMMARY OF JUDICIAL OBLIGATION.

In every particular his conduct should be above reproach. He should be conscientious, studious, thorough, courteous, patient, punctual, just, impartial, fearless of public clamor, regardless of public praise, and indifferent to private political or partisan influences; he should administer justice according to law, and deal with his appointments as a public trust; he should not allow other affairs or his private interests to interfere with the prompt and proper performance of his judicial duties, nor should he administer the office for the purpose of advancing his personal ambitions or increasing his popularity.

35. IMPROPER PUBLICIZING OF JUDICIAL COURT PROCEEDINGS.

Proceedings in court should be conducted with fitting dignity and decorum. The taking of photographs in the court room, during sessions of the court or recesses between sessions, and the broadcasting of court proceedings are calculated to detract from the essential dignity of the proceedings, degrade the court and create

misconceptions with respect thereto in the mind of the public and should not be permitted.

36. CONDUCT OF COURT PROCEEDINGS.

Proceedings in court should be so conducted as to reflect the importance and seriousness of the inquiry to ascertain the truth.

The oath should be administered to witnesses in a manner calculated to impress them with the importance and solemnity of their promise to adhere to the truth. Each witness should be sworn separately and impressively at the bar or the court, and the clerk should be required to make a formal record of the administration of the oath, including the name of the witness.