

Lawyer of the week Mark McDonald

Mark McDonald, a barrister with Furnival Chambers, acts for Michael Stone, who is serving a life sentence for the murders of Lin Russell and her daughter Megan in 1996. The Criminal Cases Review Commission (CCRC) has agreed to re-examine the evidence of a key prosecution witness.

What were the biggest hurdles you had to overcome in this case? The CCRC refers cases to the Court of Appeal only if it believes a conviction is likely to be quashed, creating a cautious and circular process. The Court of Appeal applies the "unsafe conviction" test, often prioritising finality over reviewing errors or new evidence. These factors create huge structural barriers and years of delay in challenging wrongful convictions.

Whom do you most admire in the law? Clive Stafford Smith. His work in opposing the death penalty embodies the highest ideals of the legal profession.

What is the best decision you have taken as a lawyer? Becoming a criminal defence barrister. There is no greater privilege than standing beside someone at their most vulnerable, when the state is against them. It carries immense responsibility, offers the chance to give voice to the unheard and demands the system be held to its standards.



What is the best advice you have received? Sister Helen Prejean [a campaigner against the death penalty] told me when I was a law student: never judge a person by the worst thing they have done. This principle guides my work.

What is the funniest thing that has happened in your job? While I was questioning a witness in a terrorism trial about Isis, Siri activated and loudly said it did not understand the meaning of "Isis". The courtroom paused in confusion before laughter broke the tension.

What law would you enact? Overhaul the expert witness system in criminal trials. Too often, wrongful convictions arise from unreliable or overstated expert evidence. Courts need clearer limits on expertise and robust pre-trial scrutiny of methodology.

What is your favourite film? The documentary *Fourteen Days in May*. It follows the final weeks of a man on death row in Mississippi, exposing the human cost and potential fallibility of the justice system. After watching it I knew I wanted to devote my career to criminal defence and challenging wrongful convictions.

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