

Law careers and justice for women

THE lack of women among the top ranks of South Australia's barristers is deeply concerning and raises serious questions about equality of opportunity at the highest levels of the law.

Chief Justice John Doyle is right to take up the issue with the Bar Association and Law Society after no women applied for appointments as Senior Counsel, which were granted this week to three men.

The appointments, made by the Supreme Court, are the first to replace the former designation of Queen's Counsel.

Without in any way reflecting on the abilities of the successful male applicants, the absence of women candidates is perplexing in a state that produced the first woman Queen's Counsel in Australia, Dame Roma Mitchell. It is especially disappointing in a week when the Commonwealth appointed a third woman, Justice Virginia Bell, to the present bench of seven High Court judges.

Nor does the situation make sense given the academic success of young SA women, who achieved three of the top four scores for Year 12. Two of them, Sarah Duncan and Olivia Lewis, have nominated law as possible areas of tertiary study. They would not be alone - young women continue to outnumber men as graduates from law schools.

South Australians naturally expect that should women choose a law career, they should be entitled to exactly the same opportunities as men.

Unfortunately, with women making up only about 15 per cent of the bar, the message being sent is exactly the opposite. The issue is not bias against women in the appointment of Senior Counsel but lack of opportunities given to women lawyers to garner the experience needed to reach the top of the tree.

Gaining that sort of responsibility requires a willingness by law firms to commit themselves to nurturing and supporting women, especially those who take time off to bear and look after children.

South Australia has proved to be a standard bearer of much social reform, so it is doubly disappointing that it seems to be falling behind in this area. It is unjust, in a profession which is charged with fighting for justice, and it is unproductive because it means we suppress the potential of some of the best legal minds.

The Chief Justice needs to ask some tough questions.