



One Robe's Role in the Rule of Law

BY CHIEF JUSTICE RONALD M. GEORGE
(RET.)*

ON THE AFTERNOON OF APRIL 20, 1972, a few weeks after turning 32, I received a call from Gov. Ronald Reagan appointing me to the Los Angeles Municipal Court. An hour later, I was contacted by Alan Campbell, the somewhat crusty presiding judge of the municipal court, informing me that he expected me to be in his chambers at 8:30 am on the following day, a Friday (rather than my preferred date of the following Monday), to be sworn in and then preside over a jury trial scheduled to start at 9:00 am. When I reported for duty, he loaned me a judicial robe with which my wife Barbara enrobed me (having left our three-year-old son Eric and one-year-old son Andrew at home in the care of a nanny, with our third son Chris in attendance in utero). Judge Campbell then pointed me in the direction of the first of many courtrooms to which I would be assigned.

Not since the parental oversight of my attire that I experienced as a grade-school student had I been faced with a mandatory dress-code, aside from the occasional compulsion of a black-tie event. For the next 38 years, until my retirement from the bench in 2011, I abided by the command of Government Code section 68110 to “in open court during the presentation of causes . . . wear a judicial robe . . . furnish[ed] at [one’s] own expense, [t]he Judicial Council [to], by rule, prescribe the style of such robes.”¹ The tradition of wearing robes was established by Chief Justice Waste in 1928. Fortunately, it was not accompanied by a mandate that a judicial cap be worn, although given the receding hairline of some of

* Ronald M. George served as chief justice of California from 1996 to 2011.

LEFT: Former Chief Justice Ronald M. George's robe.

PHOTO: CALIFORNIA COURTS

us male members of the court, such a provision might have enhanced the appearance of the bench.

Two weeks after joining the municipal court, I was presented with a gift of my own robe by my former colleagues at the California Attorney General's Office at a luncheon celebration they organized in a Chinatown restaurant. They had purchased the robe at an outfit that sold academic, choir, and judicial gowns. As they and Barbara formally re-enrobed me, I was presented with a fortune cookie which they eagerly urged me to open. Upon doing so, I disingenuously informed them that its advisement was “Judge not, lest ye be judged!”

This robe was to accompany me through the 38 years of service on the municipal, superior, appellate and supreme courts that resulted from five appointments by four governors from both major political parties. The robe was my companion as I presided over the resolution of thousands of disputes in which the parties sought justice, ranging from petty traffic offenses and small claims cases, to complex civil and criminal matters including the two-year-and-two-day jury trial in the Hillside Strangler case, through almost 20 years of service on the Supreme Court involving momentous issues such as those resolved in our marriage-equality decisions.

I believe that throughout these years the unadorned, plain black judicial robe worn by my colleagues and myself served its purpose of symbolizing the primacy and impartiality of the law and the impersonality of the individual judge who is called upon to administer justice, in contrast to the idiosyncratic and excessive majesty of the vestments worn by royalty and the nobility.



Ronald M. George (3RD FROM LEFT) at his Municipal Court enrobing on April 21, 1972 in the chambers of Presiding Judge Alan Campbell. Joining him are (LEFT TO RIGHT) his uncle, his mother and his wife Barbara.

PHOTO: RONALD M. GEORGE COLLECTION

For me, the robe also reinforced the law's formal recognition of the institution of marriage in the many dozens of wedding ceremonies that I performed for family members, friends, and celebrities, and early in my judicial career for persons lined up for hours at the main downtown L.A. courthouse waiting for the noon recess to have their marriage vows solemnized by a judge.

In 1996 on May 1, which we celebrate as Law Day in the United States, Gov. Pete Wilson administered the oath of office to me as chief justice of California, and Barbara for the fifth time enrobed me with that same garment. It was a joy to have my 91-year-old father and 80-year-old mother come to San Francisco and join in the occasion with other members of our family. As immigrants to this country, my parents never dreamed that such an opportunity would be offered to their son.

Soon thereafter, a member of a visiting delegation of judges asked me why my robe was hung on a coat rack adjacent to my desk instead of in a nearby closet in chambers, since the court was in session only a few days each month. My reply was that given the onslaught of statewide administrative duties that had descended upon me in my new position, I wanted to have that robe in sight as a constant reminder that I was first and foremost a judge.

As I now approach my own 80th birthday, the wearer not quite as tattered as the robe with its frayed cuffs, that garment reposes in my closet, ready to be called back into service for the occasional wedding ceremony.

If only my robe could speak, the tales it could tell! ★

ENDNOTE

1. "The judicial robe required . . . must be black, must extend in front and back from the collar and shoulders to below the knees, and must have sleeves to the wrists." (Rule 10.505.) An eccentric judge was reputed to wear, at least on occasion, a judicial robe that was pink, but her removal from the bench was for reasons unrelated to this sartorial transgression. (*Cannon v. Commission on Judicial Performance* (1975) 14 Cal. 3d 678.)

One day during my tenure as supervising judge of the criminal division of the L.A. Superior Court, news of the following incident spread like wildfire through what was then named the Criminal Courts Building. It was an especially hot and muggy day; the air conditioning system in the courthouse had broken down, and the court commissioner presiding over a jury trial, upon leaving the bench at a recess in the proceedings, rushed through the doorway into chambers, peeling off her judicial robe without realizing that the door had failed to close, revealing to everyone in the crowded courtroom that she was attired only in undergarments.