

LADY CHIEF JUSTICE OF NORTHERN IRELAND
RULE OF LAW LAUNCH REMARKS
WEDNESDAY 12th NOVEMBER 2025

Introduction

Good afternoon. I am delighted to welcome you all to the Inn of Court today for the launch of the Rule of Law in Perspective Series. This is a collaboration between my office and the Bar of Northern Ireland. I want to begin by expressing my sincere thanks to the Bar, particularly David Mulholland and Sinead McIvor, for all of the work they have done in bringing this series together. I also recognise the Law Society's Rule of Law Pledge initiative which I was happy to support as a precursor to this programme.

As many of you will have heard in my Opening of Legal Year speech, promoting a better understanding of the rule of law in this jurisdiction is one of my priorities for this year. So how can that be achieved? Firstly, we must begin by explaining what the rule of law is; discuss the challenges that exist here and elsewhere to the rule of law; and then look at those tangible things that we all can do to help protect the rule of law. This series is shaped around those three themes and, importantly, will involve representatives from a wide range of professions and perspectives including politicians, journalists, the judiciary, the legal profession and other representative groups.

Today, this first session will focus on Understanding the Rule of Law. Donal has already touched on the topics that will be explored by today's panel, so for now, I want to share some of my own thoughts on the rule of law.

Fundamentally, the rule of law is the anchor of justice in an increasingly uncertain world. It is more important than ever that we value and protect it due to increasing challenges to the rule of law in recent years, both locally and internationally, so much so that the term 'rule of law' is now part of public discourse.

In Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, we can see that public confidence in institutions, including the courts, cannot be taken for granted. It depends on the willingness of people to believe that the system is fair, independent, and relevant to them. That belief must be earned continually through openness, accountability, and empathy.

One key aspect that underpins the rule of law is safeguarding the independence of the judiciary. Society must be safe in the knowledge that we can rely on the courts to resolve disputes or uphold an individual's rights. Where disputes cannot be resolved by some other means, judges adjudicate impartially and independently. In doing so they ensure that the laws are applied correctly and enforced. Members of the public must be able to go into court and know that the judge hearing their case is completely neutral, not favouring one side or the other, and that they will apply the law fairly and impartially based only on the facts of the case.

A judge must be independent and, as importantly, be seen to be independent. That means being free from the influence of government, the legislature and political parties; from the public and lobbying groups; from the media; and from other judicial colleagues. They must not allow anybody or anything to deflect them from deciding cases on anything other than the legal and factual merits.

We must all play a part in maintaining judicial independence, which is so essential to the rule of law. This includes, amongst other things, calling out

unfair criticism that judges are unaccountable or are shielded in some way from any scrutiny. Judges hear cases in open court, their judgments are public records, and they are individually accountable for their judicial decisions through the appeals process. Politicians and members of the public are entitled to comment and to criticise decisions made by the courts – indeed that is a sign of a healthy democracy. However, any such comments need to be well informed. When they are not, those comments can have a corrosive impact on the public’s confidence in the rule of law, particularly in an age where so many people rely on a headline or a 280 character post for information on a complex case.

Transparency

Transparency is another important aspect in promoting a better understanding of the rule of law. Over the last few years, Northern Ireland has taken important steps towards modernising and strengthening its justice system. Many of those changes have been shaped by a simple principle - that justice should be accessible, transparent, and focused on outcomes that help people rebuild their lives.

On Monday of this week, I introduced a pilot scheme, which allows the media to attend and report in our family courts, with the appropriate protections for privacy in place. This represents a careful but important step in helping society to understand what happens in court and encourage more informed debate about how family justice is delivered. I intend to run the pilot for a year and keep it under review to identify its utility and where improvements may be made.

Likewise, the ongoing discussions about broadcasting sentencing remarks in the higher courts are not about performance or publicity. They are about openness and transparency, allowing people to directly listen to judicial reasoning when decisions are made. I am particularly pleased that the Minister of Justice has now agreed to remove the legal barriers to broadcasting some court proceedings, including sentencing hearings in the most serious cases.

These reforms take time and care, but they share a single purpose: to strengthen the public's understanding of, and therefore confidence in, how justice is delivered.

The Rule of Law as a Shared Responsibility

At its heart, the justice system is about the people whom it exists to serve.

I have often thought that fairness in law is not only about what happens in court, but about how people are treated along the way: the clarity of information they receive, the respect shown to victims, the tone of communication between professionals, and the consistency of support available to those who need it.

The rule of law is often spoken about as though it is a fixed structure, but in truth it is a shared responsibility. It belongs to every part of society: to the courts that interpret it, to the professionals who practise it, and to the public who rely on it.

The law must be seen to serve everyone. That means ensuring people can access justice regardless of background or means. It means explaining decisions clearly and making sure that processes are efficient and fair.

It is my hope that all those engaged with and interested in the criminal justice system, the family justice system and all aspects of our law, will engage with this Series and that it will make a contribution to Northern Ireland being recognised as a best practice example of the rule of law.

ENDS

Rule of Law video: <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/lp08ivptgc1wlfdn7iri7/Rule-of-Law-MASTER-Update.mov?rlkey=v4wowts9uj9qcqsjqfsgl73ns&e=1&st=9l24ckfj&dl=0>