



Barbara Mills KC, Chair of the Bar
Opening of the Legal Year
Tuesday 30 September 2025

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Attorney General, Ministers, my Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, together with Richard Atkinson – the President of the Law Society, it is my pleasure as Chair of the Bar Council of England and Wales, to welcome you to this dinner on the eve of tomorrow's Opening of the Legal Year.

The Opening of the Legal Year originates from the Middle Ages, when judges of the High Court, who sat at Westminster Hall, began the new legal year each October by walking across the street to Westminster Abbey to pray for divine guidance to assist their work of administering justice. The ceremony now, as then, shows the great seriousness of the task before us, and symbolises that the law and the administration of justice was, and remains, part of something higher. It is higher than passing political allegiance or loyalty to an incumbent government. It is instead something that demands reverence and sincerity.

That commitment takes myriad forms: from litigating and deciding cases that directly concern the legality of executive action or the rights of individuals and communities, as well as embodying the values and spirit of a constitution in *all* areas of

practice. For lawyers, it extends beyond the doors of the courtroom, to speaking as experts on legal issues to educate and inform the public about their rights, and the principles that drive constitutional order.

Like much of Britain's uncodified constitution, the tradition of opening the legal year (the modern form of which dates back to 1897) is one that both endures and evolves because it touches values deeply etched into our societal fabric. But also, because it has embraced a changing Britain, with legal and political leaders from increasingly diverse backgrounds, and a changing international legal order—with ever more colleagues from around the world joining us to bear witness to this moment and lend their weight to the shared values we all hold deeply.

Many of you have travelled from afar to be here with us, and we are honoured by, and grateful for, your presence. You bring perspectives, ideas and energy that will stay with us long after this occasion. We have had the privilege of visiting some of you this year, from the American Bar Association's annual meeting last month, to proceedings of the CCBE, the Commonwealth Lawyers Association, the IBA, the IAFL and LAWASIA. The collaboration between members of this global profession is genuinely inspiring.

And it is as vital as it has ever been. The Bar Leaders' discussion this afternoon was a powerful reminder, if a

reminder was necessary, of the rampant vilification, intimidation and harassment of lawyers and bar associations worldwide. As authoritarianism rises, it takes aim at those who hold power to account.

It is heartening, then, that lawyer safety has found its way onto global agendas. This year's adoption of the Convention on the Protection of the Profession of Lawyer—an instrument intended to be binding and open for ratification the world over—is a very welcome milestone. The treaty has been signed by eighteen countries across Europe, including the UK.

It was developed by the Council of Europe but has had support from nations in Latin America as well as the Pan-African Lawyers Union. It defines core rights of lawyers that are essential to their effective representation of their clients. It sets out fundamental principles: for example, that lawyers should not be conflated with the clients they represent. And it recognises the role of bar associations in defending the independence of lawyers, ensuring high professional standards of conduct, and promoting the welfare of lawyers.

We welcome the recognition that Bar associations need to focus on and promote the welfare and resilience of their members. It is one of our core roles.

To be a lawyer is to face internal contradictions and conflict – a certain level of assurance and self-confidence is required, but this is often matched with equally sized perfectionism and self-criticism, as it feels like no task is ever done well enough.

Add to that relentless pressure and high expectations, the competitiveness required of us, and, in the case of this jurisdiction, the repercussions in an adversarial process of showing weakness, it is little wonder that this can lead to chronic and unmanageable fatigue, burnout and illness, if left unchecked.

What we now know is that professionals exposed to trauma and distress experienced by their clients can themselves suffer the same vicariously because as Dr Naomi Remen said:

“The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet”

I know from the conversations with many of you that you are facing similar challenges in your jurisdictions –wellbeing deteriorating and yet the stigma that attaches to the issue still prevents many from seeking help.

I believe that incorporating the promotion of wellbeing as a necessary skill to acquire and develop, and weaving it into the

fabric of practice so that it becomes as mundane as having an accountant or insurance is the way forward.

This year we have set up pilots with groups of barristers – crime and family in Bristol and civil and commercial in London-to see whether groups facilitated by a professional trained to create a safe and reflective space for the participants to analyse and evaluate their experiences at work and to debrief after challenging and stressful encounters can make a difference. I am holding an event on 13 November during which we will share some of what has emerged from the pilots.

These are deeply divisive and troubling times. But all is not lost.

We must move together and do all we can to ensure that we have a properly protected and resilient work force to enable us and our fellow lawyers to continue to fearlessly defend the rule of law, hold powerful feet to the fire, and maintain our right and ability to tell controversial stories.

I look forward to our continued collaborations, and I hope you enjoy this dinner and tomorrow's Opening of the Legal Year ceremony. Thank you.