

Lord Ponsonby, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State
in the Ministry of Justice's, address at the British Institute
of Human Rights event for Human Rights Day 2024

10th December 2024, Houses of Parliament

- Good morning. It is great to be here in Parliament with you all to mark Human Rights Day, representing a Government which is firmly committed to protecting and promoting human rights both here in the UK and on the global stage.
- Let me begin by thanking Sanchita for inviting me to speak, and my esteemed House of Lords colleague Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson for hosting and opening this important event.
- I also extend my gratitude to the whole British Institute of Human Rights team for organising this event, and for all you do to support individuals and organisations in the UK to understand and exercise their human rights.
Thank you.
- Today we mark 76 years since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations. As the world was rebuilding following the horrors of war, this declaration set out the fundamental and inalienable rights of all people.
- Days like today serve to remind us of this enduring vision, and despite the progress we have made in bringing these rights home, it also must remind us that our work is far from done.

- I've been asked to reflect on the theme of 'focusing on human rights'. So let me begin by saying just how proud I am to be part of a Government that is putting human rights and the rule of law front and centre in Britain's return to responsible global leadership.
- The Prime Minister has reaffirmed the UK's unequivocal commitment to the European Convention on Human Rights, and fully recognises the important role that multilateral organisations such as the UN, and the Council of Europe - celebrating its 75th anniversary this year - play in upholding these rights.
- I know just how important these organisations are, having served as a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe myself, and just how important it is that we use dialogue to bring different countries together in line with our shared values. There's no doubt - Britain is *always* stronger when we work with others.
- And I know that the advocates and champions of human rights in this room will be relieved that this Labour Government will proudly uphold and respect the landmark Labour achievement that is the Human Rights Act.
- It is both an honour and a responsibility to have human rights as part of my Ministerial portfolio. I know that human rights aren't just about historic declarations - they have a tangible connection to people's lives. The human rights we enjoy, and the accompanying responsibilities we share, bind us together in our common humanity, and are an essential tool in maintaining a society based on tolerance and respect.

- I know that showcasing the impact of human rights in everyday life is a focus of the BIHR through your community programmes, so I wanted to share with you some personal reflections about how my own experience shapes my priorities in this role.
- I was a magistrate for twenty years – sitting at Horseferry Road Magistrates’ Court, just down the road from here. Concentrating on youth and family justice matters in this role, I was working on the ground to uphold justice and defend the human rights of everyday people. It wasn’t easy. But it gave me an understanding of the profound importance of human rights in a democratic and rules-based society.
- And earlier this year, I was an opposition spokesperson in the House of Lords, when the previous Government was pushing through its Rwanda asylum scheme. Sitting there in a packed chamber, I felt the eyes of the nation upon us, a nation with a proud history of defining and protecting rights. I’m sure all of us here are pleased to see the back of this policy.
- Now more than ever, as we see human rights and the rule of law challenged across the world, continued international engagement is crucial if we are to uphold and promote the rights we enjoy. Just last month, I was in Poland to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with the Polish Government on criminal justice, sharing expertise, and support for the rule of law. Such agreements are a reminder of what can be achieved when the UK leads with our values on the world stage.

- Renewing the Government's commitment to human rights and the rule of law is an important first step – and a welcome change – but warm words alone aren't enough. Action must follow.
- That is why I want to emphasise today that this Government is listening. We are open to hearing your priorities, and your ideas on how we can champion human rights and the rule of law – at home, and abroad. I have been actively engaging with various civil society organisations as part of resetting the Government's relationship with human rights partners, and will continue this in the coming months.
- One consistent theme I've heard since taking on this role is the importance of public education on human rights. Indeed, this was the topic of my first Parliamentary business as a Minister, responding to a question from Baroness Chakrabarti in the Lords. Embedding a deeper understanding and appreciation of rights among the public is absolutely essential in ensuring their protection.
- Public education around rights is something the Lord Chancellor, Attorney General and I take very seriously, and we welcome your insights, given the excellent work BIHR and many of the organisations in this room do in this space.
- To conclude: this government is fixing the foundations, and not just of our economy, but also in respect for our fundamental values, like human rights and the rule of law.

- I hope you enjoy the rest of this event, hearing from a diverse range of speakers who, despite their different backgrounds and expertise, share one common goal: ensuring individuals can use the rights they are entitled to.
- I'm only sorry that I can't stay longer – but some of my officials are here today, so please do take the opportunity to talk to them.
- I hope today inspires you to reflect on the progress we've made, and the work still to come. And I hope you come away with a renewed focus on how we can continue the vision of past generations, who defined the rights we celebrate, promote and protect today.
- Thank you.