

## THE LADY CARR OF WALTON-ON-THE-HILL, LADY CHIEF JUSTICE

### OPENING REMARKS AT CCIG CONFERENCE – 26 FEBRUARY 2026

“We help each other. A group is strong”, states Lauren, the protagonist in Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*<sup>1</sup>. The book follows Lauren’s trip as she travels towards a new home and society. And through the novel, Lauren gathers a diverse group who learn to depend on one another for skills, expertise and hope – their shared journey showcasing a practical lesson in collaboration to reshape their world.

We are here, of course, to discuss our own “Road to Recovery”. Now I am not for a moment suggesting that the criminal courts are akin to the dystopia of Butler’s creation but, on any journey, I think it is vital that we do keep our destination in sight. Lauren’s ultimate destination was Acorn – a symbol of new beginnings and greatness coming from tiny things. We, by contrast, must adapt a large, ancient and renowned justice system to the rapid pace of modern society, which includes changes in crime. How should a twenty-first century criminal justice system look? Where are we now and where do we want to be? What do we need, and who do we need, to bridge the gap?

Everyone here today has a shared vision: A modern and effective criminal justice system that allows justice to be enacted fairly, swiftly and proportionately for everyone. But the backlog in the crown courts stands at around 80,000 cases. Timely disposal of cases underpins societal confidence in the justice system, and confidence in the justice system

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<sup>1</sup> Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 1993, p.286. All quotations from 2014 paperback edition, published in the UK by Headline Publishing Group.

is integral to the rule of law. Criminal justice needs to serve the public in the way that the public deserves and expects.

Again, everyone here has an ability to “help each other”; we each have our levers to contribute to change. Those of us tasked with administering justice can use our resources to maximum effect, collaborate on an operational level to problem solve and support the overall health of the system. Meanwhile, we look to the Government to set and legislate policy, ensure a unified vision and fund the system adequately for operational leaders to deliver.

The Government is now setting out its road map with this week’s Courts Bill, the Lord Chancellor’s speech on criminal justice and this morning’s speech from Minister Sackman. The judiciary is listening and, together, we will update the route to understand how each element can work in harmony, whilst of course maintaining judicial independence throughout.

I strongly welcome the announcement of uncapped crown court sitting days. This, combined with a revised listing framework, will enable us to use the courts to their full potential and with efficiencies enabled by technology. And, in addition, the Lord Chancellor’s multi-year funding commitment helps the criminal justice system to solidify its long-term plans.

Policy decisions are now with Parliament as it considers the Courts Bill. It will be a matter for politicians, not judges. But whatever criminal justice policies Parliament decides to

enact, I remain – the judiciary remains – committed to playing a full and active part in bringing down the backlogs and modernising how the criminal courts operate.

I know all too well that all of us engaged in criminal justice are getting on with our jobs with determination and integrity. Across the country in our criminal courts, it is business as usual for the judiciary, for the magistrates and for the courts; for prosecutors, the Bar, solicitors, police, probation officers and prison staff; each and every member working to improve efficiency without compromising justice.

The expertise of our judiciary is invaluable. We are advancing, innovating and making improvements, both in the context of Sir Brian’s reviews and through pre-existing, proactive judge-led initiatives.

So, we are already exploring the opportunities that technology offers, in the right situations, to modernise and improve access to justice. Remote hearings are now used often and new judicial guidance on increasing their uptake is coming. Whilst these offer more flexibility and efficiency; their use, of course, needs to be matched by the provision of adequate and suitable equipment. More video facilities in prisons and police stations, for example, are badly needed.

Before the summer, we will publish a new judicial National Listing Framework that will be delivered through an updated Criminal Practice Direction. It will provide a more consistent and a more transparent approach to how we list criminal cases in England and Wales.

At the same time, meanwhile, invaluable knowledge-sharing on trial lengths and the risks of ineffective trials will also contribute to smarter listings, using and improving data

collection and AI to help listing officers and judges reduce the backlogs and maximise that court flexibility. And this will, in turn, allow judges' expertise to be matched up with courtroom data in a way that can help to predict how trials will run over (or under) planned schedules or where trials may be ineffective. I think, if successful, new tooling could help to flag these risks and, in the longer term, identify other cases that are a priority for listing, helping to mitigate these court delays. Of course, judicial independence and advice must remain at the core of all these advances. Judges will take the decisions on when and where remote hearings are appropriate; listing decisions, including for example the running of "Blitz" courts, will remain a judicial function.

In the long-term, changes such as these will free up judges' time from the administration of listing processes and allow us to be ever more nimble in moving from one trial to the next, with greater consistency.

So, across the criminal justice system, we are helping each other and we are making useful things happen.

A central theme of today is collaboration. Everyone in this room understands that collaboration across agencies is not optional; it is the only way that we will succeed.

Together, as Lauren put it, "we know a lot ... we know how to do a great many things."<sup>2</sup> What really matters most is that we use that knowledge to continue our momentum *across* departments and operational organisations – the judiciary collaborating with the police, the

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<sup>2</sup> p.203

CPS, the Bar, solicitors, courts, probation, prisons and many, many more – with a shared sense of direction. For if we collide, then progress stops for everyone.

That is why the work of the Criminal Court Improvement Group is so vital. It supports that meaningful collaboration between representatives for all elements of the criminal justice system. Bringing together those with that substantial operational experience is simply invaluable in helping each of us to realise the knock-on impacts that delays or problems in our respective part of the system can have on others.

Allied to this, on the Road to Recovery, it is clear that the competence of those taking the lead will be critical to success. Thankfully, we are not first-time hikers on a steep trail.

Lauren’s community was dealing “with ongoing reality, not with supernatural authority”<sup>3</sup>.

That’s what we do. The knowhow, capability and skill of each of those in the room today, and in each of our respective organisations, will be central in driving modernisation. We have an expert judiciary – almost 3,000 criminal judges, more than 1,000 recorders and 14,600 magistrates<sup>4</sup>. A word about the magistracy – a magnificent body of volunteers who deserve full recognition – time and again, it has shown its resilience and its ability to cope. Now, “of course”, you are all thinking, “she’s going to praise the judiciary” ... well you’re exactly right I am! I will be loud and I will be proud in saying that the judiciary of England and Wales is one of our biggest assets, committed to serving the public and the rule of law

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<sup>3</sup> p.206

<sup>4</sup> c.800 Circuit Judges, c.1.5k District and Deputy District Judges, c.250 District and Deputy District Judges (Mags), c.250 High Court Judges = 2.8k.

every day. But we are not alone, and we do it with a moral courage that is shared with you all and those whom you represent.

In Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, the group will never prosper without sharing knowledge and skills, and embracing their community. Collaboration and optimism, I hope, will be the tone for today. I know that all of us here have a robust sense of public service or we wouldn't be here.

We know that we are working towards a common goal. But we do also know there are many *unknowns* in our individual expertise. So, I think that you will want to be frank in discussing issues and open in entertaining possible solutions.

And in this vein, no one should be preaching "what should happen". But may I say very briefly, what should not. So, a note of caution, if I may. Our justice system is revered internationally for its fairness and service for the common good. Reform can offer bold options for modernisation, and modernise we must. But, it is essential that we always apply due diligence and we guarantee that no shortcuts are taken to compromise justice and the fairness of our procedures. Human judgement must lie at the heart of the system. Change must be thought through carefully, fundamentally modelled and properly funded.

Along any road there will be hurdles. Continued high-quality recruitment for the judiciary and in wider justice agencies is paramount; our technology must keep pace with the workload demanded of it; our courts estate must be fit for purpose. But when things go wrong, and they will, will we be the ones craning our necks to ogle the fallout? Or will we be

those offering help, collaboration and solutions to work towards our common destination?

The latter, I hope.

And there will inevitably be pleas of “are we there yet?” Modernisation is a continuing process, it shifts with technology and the expectations of society, and we may need to be patient. But we *must* recover from the backlogs. And I am optimistic that we will get there.

So, the horizon is visible now. We have a clear diagnosis of the problems, a route map for recovery and a resilient judiciary committed to change.

And so, let me end by returning to Octavia Butler, and reminding you that “this is how we will survive together. It will work.”<sup>5</sup> Collectively, we can establish the criminal justice system that society – and indeed we – deserve. Our criminal justice system must be one that allows equal justice for every person, regardless of background, financial means and influence. One that is equipped for the challenges of today and for the challenges of tomorrow, enabling defendants to know that they will have a fair hearing, victims to receive justice, and society and the economy to prosper, safely under the protection of the law.

Thank you.

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<sup>5</sup> p.139