

## THE RIGHT HON. SIR GEOFFREY VOS

### SIR HENRY BROOKE AWARD 2026 – RECIPIENT: RUTH LOPEZ

ALLIANCE FOR LAWYERS AT RISK  
FIELDFISHER, RIVERBANK HOUSE, 2 SWAN LANE, LONDON EC4R 3TT  
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#### Introduction

1. Many thanks to Dominic Grieve for that kind introduction.
2. It is an honour to have been invited to present the Sir Henry Brooke Award to Ruth Lopez, through her husband, it is very sad that she has been prevented from being here this evening.
3. Before doing so, I thought I would reflect on the rule of law itself. Some of you may have heard the speech I gave a few weeks ago at the Old Bailey about *Justice for All*.<sup>1</sup> In that speech, I explained that ‘justice’ has a new meaning in our modern times. When our justice system was created back in 1873, justice was provided only to the wealthy members of a much smaller non-diverse population. Now, the citizens and businesses of our country expect to see a system where justice is available equally to the least privileged and the most vulnerable in our society as it is to the most wealthy and the most privileged. That is a big change; it is a change that is not always immediately recognised.
4. The thesis that I shall explain tonight is equally important. I believe that the global legal community has failed adequately to explain the meaning and importance of the rule of law. I am not, of course, suggesting for a moment that lawyers are collectively responsible for the disturbingly numerous human rights violations that we see in so many countries in the second quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But I do think that we need to find more accessible and intelligible terminology if we are to persuade the generations, who have not been brought up in the shadow of two world wars, to value what we, sometimes glibly, refer to as the “rule of law”.

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Geoffrey Vos MR, ‘Justice for All, Justice for the Accused’ (Speech, Judiciary of England and Wales) <<https://www.judiciary.uk/speech-by-the-master-of-the-rolls-justice-for-all-justice-for-the-accused/>>

5. In using that term, we lawyers are really only talking to ourselves, because a vanishingly small number of young people have any real inkling of what we really mean when we use the term “rule of law”.
6. In this short speech, I will first preach to the converted, by explaining why the “rule of law” is actually even more important in 2026 than ever before, before suggesting some ways in which we might reach out more effectively nationally and internationally to explain the importance of a strong legal foundation in all our societies.

#### Why is the rule of law so important in 2026?

7. The essence of the rule of law, according to Lord Bingham, is, if I may summarise his famous 8 principles: the clear and accessible predictability of a legal system that applies equally to all, to protect the fundamental rights of the citizen, with the powers of the executive exercised proportionately, fairly and in good faith, so as to comply with national and international legal obligations.
8. I think we fail to explain those principles because lawyers, and even judges, often tend to see the legal system from their point of view. They take less time to view the legal system from the point of view of those who are subjected to it. The importance of a fair criminal justice system is more than obvious to those who are prosecuted - unfairly, as we hear tonight - but that is a small minority of people in most societies. Many citizens fail to understand the importance of civil justice even though many more have need of it than are affected by criminal justice.
9. If one looks at the legal system from the point of view of citizens and businesses, laws and legal systems are all about allowing people to live their lives without undue or inappropriate interference from the state. It is about: “live and let live”. It is about living and allowing others to live so long as they do not harm others. It is all about tolerance, personal and institutional. It is possible, without making any political comment (and no judge would ever make any political comment.) to remark on the significantly increased levels of intolerance since the lessons of two world wars started seemingly to recede from the minds of the citizens of societies across the world.
10. In all our modern societies, many people no longer respect those seen as “human rights lawyers”. That disrespect is strange, because the main objective of most human rights lawyers is to defend the rights of the vulnerable and those in society who are less able to defend themselves.
11. Let me share an anecdote with you. When I was Chairman of the Bar Council of England and Wales in 2007, I was interviewed on Radio 4, and I suggested that most lawyers in this country, and specifically those acting on legal aid, were public servants like doctors and nurses and worthy of similar respect. I was, to say the least, derided by the interviewer.

12. But the point I was making was an important one. Lawyers have, for many years now, failed to make their own case. They have failed to explain that, whilst some in the legal community are highly paid, many and probably most, are not so well paid and are fearless defenders of the rights of the vulnerable.
13. With that introduction, I come to the ways in which we might reach out more effectively to explain what the rule of law really means and why it is so important.

#### Explaining the rule of law

14. The term “rule of law” is opaque. Non-lawyers and even many lawyers think it is about the enforcement of law against citizens, rather than enforcing, or rather upholding, the rights of citizens against the state.
15. One more anecdote. I remember vividly an annual meeting of the American Bar Association that I attended, where the ABA President gave a speech asking where we would all be without the rule of law. They gave, as an example, how terrible it would be if people stopped adhering to the rules of the road and started driving on the left. I wondered what that had to do with the rule of law. That was, perhaps, about the value of a rules-based society or about the enforcement of rules and law that benefit everyone in society. It was not really about the clear and accessible predictability of a legal system that applies equally to all, to protect the fundamental rights of the citizen, with the powers of the executive exercised proportionately, fairly and in good faith, so as to comply with national and international law obligations – to repeat my summary of Lord Bingham principles one more time.
16. I wonder if we could find a better phrase than the “rule of law”. I am conscious in this search of the unpopularity and mistrust of lawyers, to which I have already alluded. But the rule of law is a concept that protects the rights of all our citizens, including rights against the state. It is a forgiving concept. No state can ever 100% satisfy every aspect of the rule of law. But states can aspire to allow their citizens legal rights that can be vindicated at proportionate cost and without delay. The legal rights I am talking about are those rights that can be exercised without harming others.
17. Of course, our citizens will sometimes disagree about where the lines are to be drawn. They will disagree about what levels of free speech actually do harm others. They will disagree about what rights of family and private life should be protected and when such rights do inappropriately invade the rights of others or harm others. But right-thinking citizens should never really disagree about the more fundamental human rights, such as the right to life, freedom from torture or imprisonment without a fair trial.



18. It is for that reason that events like this are so important. The Alliance for Lawyers at Risk epitomises the importance of what, we lawyers call and what we lawyers understand, as the rule of law. But what it really epitomises is the defence of the principles of basic justice and basic rights for all. Even those of our citizens who decry human rights and even lawyers, would not want to be subjected to unjust imprisonment at the hands of an over-powerful state, let alone torture or death. It is this that has to be explained. The words “rule of law” sound very anodyne and are apt to mislead. As I have said, they give the impression that lawyers are simply defending the process by which they (the lawyers) support a state system which enforces the law (good or bad) against private citizens. That is the antithesis of what we mean by the rule of law. But that is why I see the phrase as being potentially problematic, and in need of greater detail & explanation.
19. So, what can we do about it? I have not got a complete solution. But I do think that if we are going to continue using the widespread shorthand “rule of law” outside our legal communities, we should explain what we mean.
20. We should explain that, as proponents of the rule of law, we are proponents of the clear and accessible predictability of the legal system, that we support open justice and access to fair justice for all, that we are seeking to protect the fundamental rights of all, and we support those states that exercise proportionate and accountable power over their citizens in good faith, and - more than ever in the modern world - those states that comply with their obligations under national and international law.

We should, perhaps, also explain that what we are talking about is not for the benefit or self-aggrandisement of the lawyers, but for the benefit of all citizens – to enable them to live and let live in a tolerant society where their rights are respected. It is, as I have said, all about tolerance and respect – not about protecting lawyers or even judges...which is a very important thing to do.

### Conclusion

21. I am sure that some of the distinguished lawyers here tonight will be able to think up some new and catchy terminology to replace, or at least, supplement the “rule of law”. I don’t want to distract from the points I have made by suggesting another catchphrase to describe the “rule of law”. It would be good, though, if we could think of one.
22. Let me close by recalling the efforts of Sir Henry Brooke himself. I worked with Sir Henry for many years as a Trustee of the Slynn Foundation. His energy and principles were unsurpassed. The Unique Selling Point of the Slynn Foundation was then, and is now, to help judiciaries across Europe and the world to enhance their independence. Again, the independence of the judiciary is not, as some perhaps think, a self-serving objective. An independent judiciary is essential if there is to be an accessible, fair and predictable legal system.

It is essential if we are to have justice for all, and if the fundamental rights of all our citizens are to be protected, and if those citizens are to be properly protected against the over-zealous exercise of state power. Sir Henry was tireless in working with jurisdictions across the world to bring about these objectives. Those of us who worked closely with him miss him very much.

23. I am delighted now to award the Sir Henry Brooke Award for 2026 to Ruth Lopez, about whose extraordinary courage we have already heard tonight. Ruth Lopez epitomises the qualities that I have mentioned. It is truly sad that she cannot be with us here tonight. But I am delighted that her husband has travelled from El Salvador to receive the award on her behalf. We are also delighted to have the CEO of Cristosal here tonight. We must all commend Ruth Lopez's selfless ground-breaking work in exposing corruption, defending access to justice for migrants and documenting the dismantling of democratic institutions in El Salvador. I offer my sincere congratulations to Ruth Lopez.