

It's a pleasure to welcome you all today to Public Law Project's 20th annual conference.

I am Shameem Ahmad the CEO of PLP and your chair this morning.

I'd like to extend PLP's gratitude to our longstanding partners, Herbert Smith Freehills and Blackstone Chambers, for their commitment to delivering to PLP's annual conference, working with our fantastic Events Team, Amelie and the legend that is Ade.

Together they deliver, if I may say, the public law conference, year on year.

I'd also like to thank each of our attendees, past and present, for making this conference what we wish it to be: a community of people interested in public law.

Our attendees and speakers today represent that community well. We share this space with pre-eminent lawyers, grassroots activists, civil society organisations, academics and researchers, people with lived experience, government officials, students of the law, as well as many other important stakeholders. The plurality of our community is our strength.

Together we will be engaging with ideas relating to power and the law through the prism of the issues of the day.

Like me, many of you may feel the concept of power on a deeply personal level.

As someone that grew up on a council estate on benefits, I know first hand why exercising power well matters.

It is that understanding that has driven me to explore through the course of my career the many facets of power in this country: as an advisor in government, as a public lawyer representing individuals, companies, public bodies and charities, and as a senior leader in the civil society space.

I joined PLP because, as an organisation, its starting point is the same as mine: that the state is capable of enormous good. That it gets it wrong sometimes is why the law is there, to allow it to be channelled back to its right course.

Through public law:

Claire, our client, has ensured that victims of domestic abuse will be able to access legal aid, notwithstanding that they have assets trapped in a home that would otherwise have made them ineligible.

Our client K has ensured that the DWP must exercise greater discretion on debt recovery.

Our research participants have shone a light on the significant harm caused by GPS tagging of migrants, which is forming the bedrock of litigation.

These people, and many more, have all harnessed power through the law and held it to account.

The PLP team also knows that to ensure people can hold power to account, we need to shape the system itself.

To this end we have taken the first steps to bring a case against the Lord Chancellor. It is our belief, based on hard evidence, that the availability of legal aid for immigration in England and Wales is so poor that he is in breach of his duty to provide access to justice.

Further, upskilling this community is key to strengthening the system itself. In addition to the Annual conference, as many of you know, we run events throughout the year. The next one is in November, where through a series of seminars in partnership with the ILPA, the Strategic Legal Advice Committee, and the Strategic Legal Fund we will explore how to challenge unfairness in the immigration system.

Through our innovative research and policy work we are also ensuring that the use of tech by public bodies is fair and transparent. Our TAG register exposes over 50 automated decision making algorithms, identified by PLP and our partners through painstaking FOIs and having to trawl through lengthy, seemingly innocuous reports. We will not allow public bodies to make unlawful, life altering decisions, in the shadows.

And in light of the assaults on our constitution, we are working hard to ensure that accountability remains central to it, by recognising the importance of yes government, but also parliament, the courts, and indeed people.

The enormous effort of the team to counter the Illegal Migration Bill, now Act, which passed through Parliament at breakneck speed was both heartbreaking and affirming to witness. We continue to work with our partners on the ramifications including on our constitution.

Separately, we are also intervening in Liberty's case against government, where we seek to prove the obvious: that Parliament is sovereign, not the Home Secretary nor any other minister.

I'd also like to give a particular plug to Animesh, a resident of the Bay of Bengal, who has contributed a recording for the environment breakout today, about the environmental damage to his region. The global nature of the issues facing us, and our ultimate interconnectedness, and shared responsibility cannot be ignored. If I may use this platform to highlight that there is a link in your delegate packs, to help support that community. If you can, please do consider giving.

All of this work, and so much more, is vital in strengthening our systems which have been stretched to breaking point. Because without the ability to check power, it is so often those without privilege that suffer, and as a result society as a whole weakens.

Power and the law have always played a central role in PLP's work. Looking to the future, though, I'll be honest: the stakes feel ever so high.

The cost of living crisis, climate change, technology advancing exponentially. We are also now living in a period where government rejects transparency, attempts to undermine fundamental rights and restricts the power of the courts, ultimately insulating itself from scrutiny.

Nonetheless, the opportunity to reimagine the world also feels within reach. That's what today is about.

I look forward to exploring with you today our role, as people interested in public law, in how we meet the challenges head on.

As PLP's clients and partners demonstrate every day, the law is a vital tool to unlock power, to ensure the state fulfils its great potential.

So, here's another 20 years of PLP annual conferences.

Let's crack on.