

DON'T LET HUMAN RIGHTS BE A DIRTY WORD

UNDERSTANDING HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE UK: 2024

In the last five years, the UK has witnessed an increase in threats to minimise, remove or replace human rights laws in the UK - by the government. These are laws that currently protect all of our day-to-day lives and are there as a safety net should we ever need them.

Over the last decade, the UK government has proposed withdrawing from the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) - which is now a genuine threat. In January 2024, Siofra O'Leary, president of the ECHR **issued** a warning to the Prime Minister that he would be breaking international human rights law if the government ignored orders from the court not to send asylum seekers to

Rwanda.

However, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has stated that he will not rule out withdrawing the UK from the ECHR, a move that would put us on a bench with Belarus and Russia. It would be the first time a nation broke away from a human rights treaty it helped write.

As we move nearer to a General Election, misinformation, damaging rhetoric and threats to withdraw from the ECHR are ever-present. Now, it is as vital as ever to protect each others' rights - but to do that we need your support.

THE UK IN A SNAPSHOT...

- The majority of the Public (two-thirds) **say** they have little or no confidence that they have a say on the decisions made by the government.
- **90%** of low-income households on universal credit are going without essentials and those with disabilities are the most affected.
- **145,800** children are living in temporary accommodation in the UK and last winter **139,000 children** were left destitute. It was the highest number on record and as a result, the use of emergency food parcels increased by **87%** since 2017.
- **3.5 million households** in England are inadequate and fail to meet the Decent Homes Standard.

However, you can make a difference and the first step is familiarising yourself with your rights.

HUMAN RIGHTS IS NOT A DIRTY WORD...

Over the past four years, human rights have increasingly been presented in a negative light. The way we talk about certain issues is important because it can be used for political gain, to fuel misinformation or to misrepresent something or someone. Let's take a look at how we got to where we are today...

October 2020

Former Prime Minister Boris Johnson, whilst serving as PM was **reported** for the first time using the term: 'lefty lawyers' in his conservative party conference speech. The speech was heavily criticised by the Bar Council, who called it "shocking and troubling".

Johnson would continue to repeat the term for the duration of his time in office. He notably, **accused** lawyers of acting 'against the best interests of the public' and abetting the work of criminal gangs".

August 2022

Now in office, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak continued the "lefty lawyer" phrase. He **stated** in an interview: "We've got to change the definition of asylum. At the moment we use the ECHR, the European definition, and that is very broad. It's become broader. Over time it's exploited by lefty lawyers for lots of spurious reasons to keep people here."

October 2022

In an attempt to defend the government's controversial Public Order Bill, Home Secretary Suella Braverman reeled off a long list of people she disliked, including the "Guardian-reading, tofu-eating wokerati" - at the time the rhetoric was thought to include protesters, campaigners and lawyers. A month later, Former conservative education minister, Andrea Jenkyns, **accused** human rights lawyers of being 'anti-British'.

June 2023

Former Prime Minister Liz Truss **admitted** that the government's priority was to 'take on lefty lawyers', who are 'constantly on the phone to illegal migrants trying to keep them in the United Kingdom.'

8 March 2023

During Prime Minister's Questions, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak accused the leader of the Labour Party, Keir Starmer of being: "just another lefty lawyer". The Bar Council **issued** its second statement in response to a Prime Minister's rhetoric, describing it as "a startling and regrettable ignorance about the role of lawyers".

December 2023

Sunak states that he won't allow 'foreign courts' - referring to the ECHR - to block the controversial Rwanda migration partnership, which would seek to place a lifetime ban on migrants arriving in the UK across the channel and deport them to Rwanda.

May 2024

The Government claims that the first 'failed asylum seeker' has been 'removed' to Rwanda. However, it was **dubbed** an 'extortionate pre-election gimmick' after it came to light that they paid the individual £3,000 to relocate to Rwanda, under a separate scheme.

Secretary of State for Business and Trade, Kemi Badenoch **said** in an interview that Rwanda is safe because she knows someone having their gap year there. The statement was made despite the UK government criticising Rwanda in 2021 over "extra judicial killings, deaths in custody, enforced disappearances and torture".

Rhetoric is just one form of misinformation, but we're here to set the record straight.

LEAVING THE ECHR WOULD PUT US ALONGSIDE BELARUS & RUSSIA...

Since Prime Minister Rishi Sunak stated that he won't allow 'foreign courts' - referring to the ECHR - to block the controversial Rwanda migration partnership, there has been growing misinformation about the European Court of Human Rights.

The European Convention protects over 800 million people, and the European Court has considered over 800,000 cases since it was formed. It isn't a "foreign court". It was a British Conservative politician and future Lord High Chancellor called Sir David Maxwell Fyfe, who was central to drafting the Convention. Winston Churchill was one of its biggest cheerleaders. And every member has its own judge, including Britain.

Since Brexit, there has been widespread disinformation about the ECHR, but it is important to understand that the ECHR and the Council of Europe are completely separate from the European Union - despite the **media regularly mixing them up**.

The Council of Europe exists to protect human rights in Europe and supervises the European Convention including ensuring its judgments are complied with. A separate entity is the European Union, which was set up by a different international agreement; it has its own court and parliament.

Human rights aren't just meant to be nice words. The whole point is that if they are being breached, you can do something about it. If you think any of your rights have been breached, you can make a claim to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

However, it is vital that the HRA and the ECHR are both protected because you must bring your claim to the UK first. Luckily, the **Human Rights Act** includes all of the main rights contained in the Convention, so the Convention is, in effect, in force in UK law. However, if you don't succeed in this country and you want to take your case further, you can then make a claim to the European Court of Human Rights, which exists to hold countries accountable for upholding and protecting residents' human rights.

THE UK'S TREATMENT OF RIGHTS IS 'DEEPLY TROUBLING'

The UK's treatment of rights is 'deeply troubling' Legal experts, NGO's and the UN condemned the UK government for 'deeply troubling' bills put before parliament, many of which went on to be enacted in law, and some rushed through in a matter of days.

The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 increased police and ministerial powers to further restrict the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, including new policing powers to implement restrictions on the grounds of noise and nuisance, which risk being disproportionate.

The Public Order Act 2023, which has now been passed by Parliament in the United Kingdom, is deeply troubling legislation that is incompatible with the UK's international human rights obligations regarding people's rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association, according to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk.

Following the **arrests** of dozens of people on 6 May 2023, the day of the Coronation of King Charles, police officers, barristers, campaigners and volunteers gave evidence before the home affairs select committee, in which human rights experts stated the bill was having a 'chilling effect' on society.

Despite this turbulent landscape, there is one particular group that can make a difference: The public. In recent years, the human rights sector has seen members of the public raise thousands of pounds to hold the police accountable for wrongful arrests, detainment and assaults, take part in workshops to raise awareness of rights and work within communities to champion the rights of each other.

THE UK ONCE CHAMPIONED OUR RIGHTS AND IT CAN AGAIN...

Holding authorities to account for their treatment of human rights is possible and we've seen it happen time and time again, through judiciary reviews, protests, and campaigning, to name a few.

In January, a controversial policy to remove basic housing protections from asylum seekers was withdrawn by the government. It was withdrawn following the legal action of eight asylum seekers who challenged the draft regulations, just hours before a high court hearing. As a result of eight people invoking their rights, everyone living in a multiple occupancy residence has the same rights to protection.

Last year a public inquiry into the UK authorities' handling of the COVID-19 pandemic began. The inquiry is tasked with identifying lessons learned to inform future pandemic responses following the death of over 200,000 people. It is partially down to the pressure from grass-roots organisations and campaigners that the inquiry is taking place.

Despite proposals from the government to scrap the HRA and replace it with a bill of rights, thanks to the dedicated work of campaigners and support from the public, the bill was shelved in 2023.

IT'S TIME TO HAVE YOUR VOICE HEARD...

EachOther and LUSH are now on a mission to hear about your experiences and your perception of human rights issues in the UK and how these issues are approached by authorities like the government, police and the courts.

Here is how you can help, by **filling out our survey** and passing it on to one contact, you will help ensure that EachOther can continue standing up for rights across the UK. Stand up for Each other's rights. Make your voice heard!

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