

CommHR(2026)5

“Human rights in a shifting world: broadening support, securing futures”  
20th Wilton Park annual human rights dialogue

Speech by Michael O’Flaherty  
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United Kingdom, 22 January 2026

*The following intervention was delivered by Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Michael O’Flaherty, at the 20th Wilton Park annual human rights dialogue*

We can agree that we are proceeding through a change of era. We have no way of predicting what the future will look like in terms of the core institutions of our societies.

Everything is up for grabs, including human rights. It is by no means automatic or evident that what we have achieved in terms of human rights, law and institutions will carry forward into the new era. However, if we consider that human dignity must in any era remain at the heart of our societies, the honouring of human dignity as a core goal of our societies, then we have no choice but to struggle to ensure that human rights is carried forward. After all, human rights is the road map for the honouring of human dignity in our societies and as it was once put, there is no plan B.

Allow me to propose seven points in terms of what we can do to ensure the transition into the new era of human rights. And in putting these points, I acknowledge that there is something of a Europe focus given the nature of my work and I am certainly clear that my seven are by no means comprehensive.

Number one, we must defend the core of what has already been achieved in terms of the human rights acquis. That means that we must stand up for its fundamental principles.

For instance, we have to stand up assiduously for the principle of universality, recognising that everybody is co-equal in rights on the basis of humanity. We must avoid a hierarchisation of rights holders. This is particularly relevant at the moment in Europe in the context of discussion on migration and the question of which migrants have more or less rights than others. It is no less at issue in terms of the discussion around the principle of non-refoulement.

Staying with the defence of what has already been achieved, it is no less vital for us to stand up for the core human rights institutions. I have here in mind at the international level the United Nations, the Council of Europe, the OSCE and the other regional systems. For sure every one of them will benefit from reform but they in their essence must be protected and saved.

In fact, we need to focus now on making them resilient. We need to do a road test if you will of the organisations to ensure that they are well positioned and capable of surviving such shocks to the system as profound budget cuts, the departure of member states and a failure to co-operate one with the other.

The second of my seven points is the importance of protecting civil society. Civil society is under pressure or attack right across the world and we have to acknowledge that without civil society we cannot have a human rights movement. Without human rights civil society, we lack the engine for the protection and delivery of human rights. So we must engage the attacks, offer protection and also, very practically, ensure that civil society is adequately funded.

The third of the key points has to do with capturing the energy of young people and marshalling it in service of and support of human rights. Above all capturing the energy, the anger and the desire to change societies that is so visible in Gen Z.

In order to do this capture of the energy it is vital that we invest in active listening to young people to make sure that they are properly heard and their views respectfully paid attention to. But no less important is the task of upskilling young people in terms of the human rights system itself. They have a desire and an anger and an energy to transform our societies for the better and of course they can achieve so much in that regard if they employ the human rights system, the human rights aquis of law, principles, standards and institutions.

For a fourth of my seven, echoing much of the discussion here over the last few days, indeed we have to do a better job of selling human rights, of making the case for human rights. This means we must try and make the business case where that is relevant. We must make the security case where that is in point.

And always we must argue of how human rights delivers better outcomes in terms of such vital qualities for our societies as peace and trust. In terms of human rights and peace right now I am very focused on seeing how we can do a better job in terms of our engagement with the pathway to peace in Ukraine.

Fifth of the seven, it is important and necessary to broaden the categories of human rights duty bearers, to embrace the private sector. My focus right now is on the technology world and in that context on the need to resist the calls for deregulation of such technologies as artificial intelligence.

Sixth of the seven, we must never lose sight of the central role of states. States will make or break the present and the future and we must and are entitled to demand strong principled leadership in defence of human rights.

Seventh and finally, and I can only most briefly touch on these elements even though I consider them to be of primordial importance, we have to take account of two intergenerational evils that persist in our societies. The first is patriarchy, the persistent attempts for men to dominate over women in just about every aspect of our lives, a corrosive cancer that will undermine any efforts to build the societies that human rights put before us. Second and no less important, we have to acknowledge the extent to which the legacy of colonialisation undermines so many of our attempts to build better futures right across the world, regardless of who we are or where we are.

Thank you very much.