

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

School of Law

Lord Woolf of Barnes

Lord Woolf of Barnes is the most prominent judge in the Common Law world. After a distinguished career as a barrister and Queen's counsel in which he made his name as an advocate of exceptional abilities and integrity, Lord Woolf was rapidly elevated through the judicial ranks. In the course of his judicial career, Lord Woolf held every major office including, as Master of the Rolls, the head of the civil division, as Chief Justice, head of the judiciary and as a Lord of Appeal in Ordinary, a member of the highest court in England and Wales, the House of Lords.

Although he achieved prominence in all the areas he worked and undertook important inquiries into matters of great public importance, such as the prisons, Lord Woolf's most important contribution is his work on reform of civil justice and it is this work that he reflects the aspirations of the new School of Law at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Civil justice matters to every citizen. It is the means by which an ordinary person can seek redress for loss or injury caused by the actions of another. Common examples involve recovery for injuries caused by an accident at work or in a traffic accident, loss or injury caused by the negligence of another, compensation for defective goods bought by a consumer, assistance with problems arising out of breakdowns within families and help with loss of employment or in housing disputes.

The problems faced by citizens in all England and Wales (and indeed all common law countries) was that the law and procedures in this area of law was so complex and costly that the law was not understood by ordinary people, became the preserve of lawyers, was too costly for many individuals to invoke and ultimately was of little help to many people. Following a detailed inquiry, Lord Woolf recommended the introduction of what have become known as 'The Woolf Reforms'.

These reforms have started to revolutionise civil justice by making the law accessible to ordinary citizens. This has been achieved by stripping away ancient and arcane language (for example, 'plaintiff', an old and little used word to describe the person suffering the loss or injury is replaced by the readily understood term 'claimant'), simplifying procedures, giving the judge greater powers to manage the case (rather than allowing the lawyers to run the proceedings) and encouraging the settlement of cases in order to avoid the vast expense litigation in court.

The Woolf reforms have inspired similar reform elsewhere and, indeed, proposals for reform have been made in Hong Kong by the Working Party on Civil Justice Reform and are currently the subject of public consultation.

Reforms such as these are fully in the spirit of the School's approach to law: to make it accessible, understandable and available to the ordinary citizen as well as to those, such as banks and financial institutions, who are already well-served by legal representatives. Lord Woolf will better help the School to achieve its aims in bringing the law into the community and the community into the School.