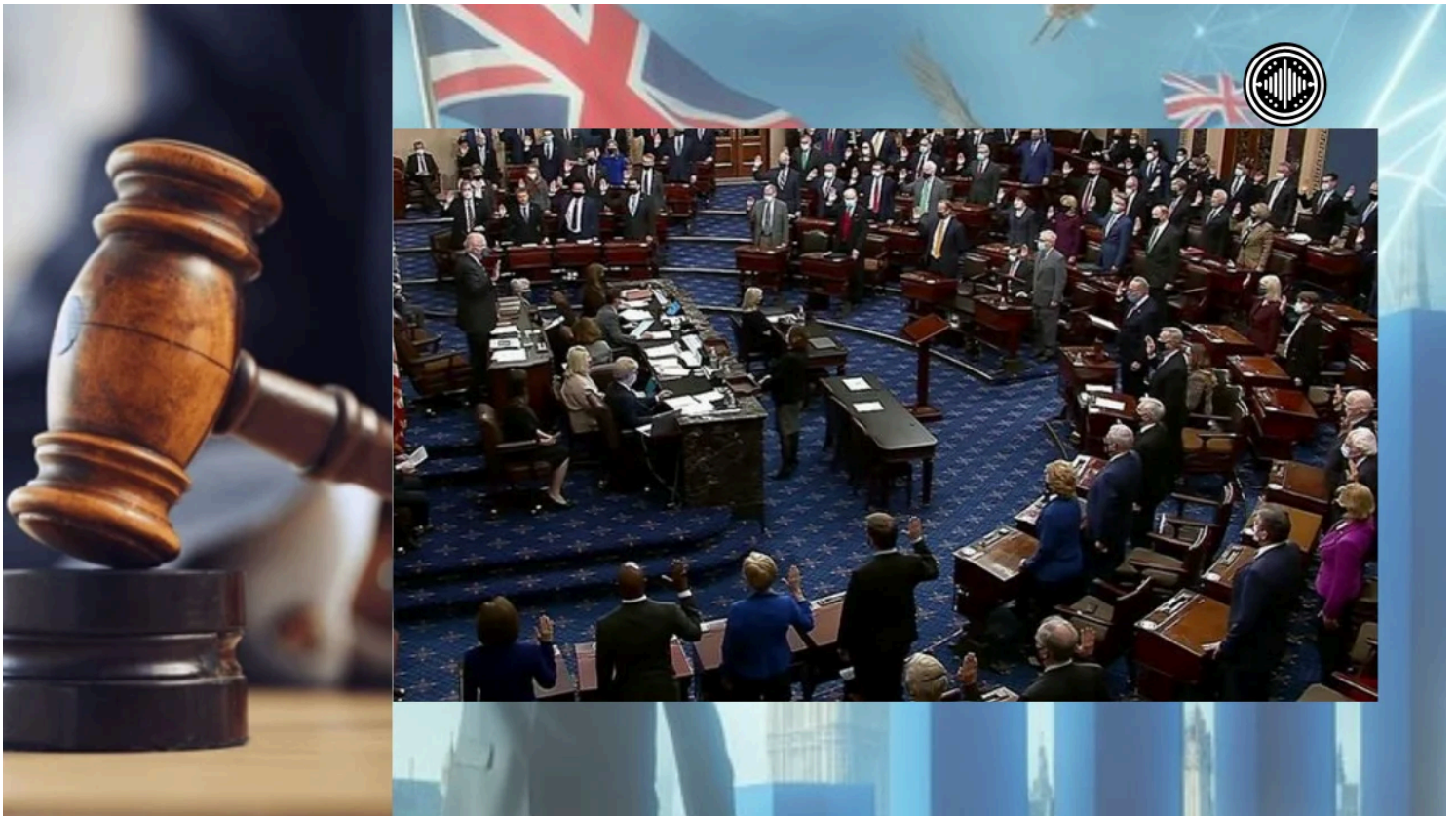


Call to Curb Jury Trials as Justice System Faces Record Backlog

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— Categories: Human Rights



A government-backed review has urged curtailing the right to jury trials for some offences to address the UK's deepening criminal court backlog. The recommendation comes amid growing concern that the justice system is creaking under the weight of delays, with victims waiting years for cases to be heard.

The UK's criminal justice system is now facing its most severe pressure in decades, with more than 75,000 cases waiting to be heard in the Crown Court. To address this alarming backlog, former senior judge Sir Brian Leveson has put forward a bold set of recommendations, including restricting the right to trial by jury in certain cases. The review proposes that cases carrying sentences of up to two years be tried instead by a judge and two magistrates in newly established "intermediate courts", aiming to streamline proceedings and free up critical court resources.

This proposal marks a significant departure from a centuries-old tradition of trial by jury and is being presented as a practical, if controversial, solution to a growing crisis. The report also suggests that complex fraud and financial crime cases could be heard solely by judges, eliminating what it sees as unnecessary delays caused by lengthy jury trials.

Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Mark Rowley lent support to the initiative, warning that the delays are "threatening the integrity of justice" and fuelling public frustration. Victims are currently being told their cases may not be resolved until 2029, a reality that undermines confidence in the justice system and could, as Sir Brian warned, lead to communities losing faith in lawful redress.

Other measures in the report include increasing incentives for guilty pleas, raising the sentence discount from 33% to 40%, and expanding magistrates' sentencing powers to two years. Collectively, these changes are expected to recover thousands of sitting days annually.

However, the proposals have not been without criticism. Legal groups, including the Bar Council and the Law Society, have voiced concern that curtailing jury trials could weaken public trust and reduce transparency.

They argue the solution lies in boosting judicial capacity and properly funding the court system, not in compromising the principles of open justice. There is also concern over whether magistrates and judges have the resources and time to handle an increased caseload, especially with complex or sensitive issues.

Justice Secretary Shabana Mahmood has indicated that the Labour government will respond to the review in the coming months. Given the scale of the backlog, critics warn against the temptation to opt for short-term fixes while ignoring the root of the crisis: years of underinvestment, administrative inefficiency, and a lack of political will to prioritise justice infrastructure.

With public patience wearing thin and criminal cases piling up, the government faces pressure to act decisively. But any move that reduces fundamental legal rights, such as the right to trial by jury, will need to be justified not just by practicality, but by principle.