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Tough Talk: Chief judge's blunt approach ruffles feathers and commands respect

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"When you help people successfully, it gives you a sense of self-confidence," says Rowan D. Wilson, chief judge of the New York Court of Appeals. (Office of Governor of New York/Darren McGee via AP, File)

As chief judge of the New York Court of Appeals for the past three years, Rowan D. Wilson has been candid about his efforts to overhaul the court system.

He has also advocated for the passage of the Second Look Act in New York. The bill would allow certain individuals serving lengthy prison sentences to petition a court for a reduction or modification.

"Put simply, our criminal justice system isn't working," Wilson said during his February 2025 State of the Judiciary address. "Maybe it hasn't really ever worked. Prolonged incarceration is very expensive, and it does not make us safer."

Vincent Bonventre is the Justice Robert H. Jackson Distinguished Professor at Albany Law School, where he specializes in constitutional law, criminal law and the judicial process.

Bonventre says that Wilson "has made it his business to be clear that he thinks the system is just not working well at all. He's not afraid to talk about policy matters that affect the courts."

Wilson's comments have "ruffled some feathers" because some people "think, 'Why do we have a judge talking about this stuff?'" Bonventre says. "Yes, he's blunt, but he's talking about the heart and soul of the legal system of New York."

The judge also implemented a new rule, approved by the state Administrative Board of the Courts and the Court of Appeals, requiring trial judges who handle sentencing or juvenile detention decisions to annually visit correctional facilities. It was announced in June.

"When you go into prisons, you can engage in conversations and see what people have been up to," says Wilson, 65. "You can see the ones who are working to help other people."

Katie Schaffer, director of advocacy and organizing at the Center for Community Alternatives, says Wilson has been "using the authority of his office to tell the truth, challenge complacency and push the court system to live up to its highest ideals."

The first Black New York state chief judge, Wilson recently endorsed a proposal from Gov. Kathy Hochul to invest \$4.5 billion in universal state pre-K and free child care for 2-year-olds in New York City. The 2K program will have 2,000 available seats.

"Imagine the stress that a poor family faces; maybe the family is a single mother trying to hold down a job that barely covers food and housing while also caring for her young children," he said in his 2026 State of the Judiciary address. "Free and accessible child care gives that mother the ability to further her education or advance her career, knowing that her children are safe and being educated and cared for, which gives the whole family stability and the promise of a better future."

Helping others

Wilson says he learned in childhood that helping others is both important and enjoyable. As the oldest of three children growing up in Pomona and Berkeley, California, he was responsible for assisting his blind mother by reading to her at a "very, very early age."

"When you help people successfully, it gives you a sense of self-confidence," Wilson says.

He emphasizes that "functioning as [his mother's] eyes" pushed him to become a stellar reader and helped lead to his mother earning her doctorate at the University of California at Berkeley. Wilson's mother died from breast cancer while Wilson was attending Harvard College. He graduated from Harvard Law School in 1984.

There are no lawyers in Wilson's family, and at first he thought he wanted to be an architect until he realized he "couldn't draw at all." He then thought he would be a doctor until he watched medical students sawing open human cadavers.

"That was the end of my medical aspirations," he says.

Time with the speech and debate team in high school, which led him to research and speak about legal topics, led to Wilson's legal career. He worked as a judicial law clerk before turning to private practice at Cravath, Swaine & Moore, where he was a partner.

In 2017, he became an associate judge on the Court of Appeals, and in 2023, Gov. Hochul nominated him as chief judge.

'Way out of bounds'

In March of this year, the New York Post concluded Wilson "stepped way out of bounds" by endorsing the proposed Second Look Act.

Also in March, Republican lawmakers filed an [ethics complaint](https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/27870785-complaint-against-chief-judge-rowan-wilson/)

(<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/27870785-complaint-against-chief-judge-rowan-wilson/>) with the New York State Commission on Judicial Conduct against Wilson after he criticized state sentencing laws as "stupid" during a panel discussion focused on sentencing reform.

New York State Sen. Anthony Palumbo, a Republican, [said](https://www.nysenate.gov/newsroom/articles/2026/anthony-h-palumbo/assembly-and-senate-republican-judiciary-committee-members)

(<https://www.nysenate.gov/newsroom/articles/2026/anthony-h-palumbo/assembly-and-senate-republican-judiciary-committee-members>) when the complaint was filed that the job of "New York state's top judge is to ensure that our laws are upheld and impartially administered so that justice is served for all parties."

Palumbo added that political opinion "has no place in the judiciary, and unfortunately, partisan bias has infiltrated our court system that should otherwise be sacrosanct."

The complaint has been dismissed, according to Rolando Acosta, Wilson's lawyer.

Palumbo declined comment. Wilson says that he's glad there's an outlet for people who are concerned about a judge to file a complaint and have it reviewed.

But New York State Rep. Charles D. Lavine, a Democrat, says that the complaint and accompanying press conference amounted to "cheap political theater" and "nothing more than demagoguery" at a time when judges are under threat.

New Yorkers are "known for being direct and being blunt," Lavine says.

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