Predatory Marriage – a Hidden Crime

Daphne Franks
2025 Churchill Fellow



Joan Blass and Daphne Franks at Joan's 90th birthday party in April 2014

the CHURCHILL fellowship

Disclaimer

Copyright ©14th November, 2026 by Daphne Franks. The moral right of the author has been asserted.

The views and opinions expressed in this report and its content are those of the author and not of the Churchill Fellowship or its partners, which have no responsibility or liability for any part of the report.

Table of Contents

Daphne Franks biography....3
Executive Summary....4
Solutions....4
INTRODUCTION....5
Predatory Marriage – A Definition and Description....7
Our Story....10
How I chose the countries to investigate....16
Purpose of this report....17
Dementia....18
My approach to the investigation....20
THE UNITED KINGDOM....21
The Law....22
Void and Voidable....24
What we could have done before my mother's death....25
Statutory Will....25
Caveat in Expectation of Marriage....26
Safeguarding at Civil Marriage....26
Capacity to Marry....31
CANADA....35
Background....35
The Law and the Safeguarding in Canada....37
Marriage Revoking a Will....38
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA....44
The Law and the Safeguarding in the USA....44
THE NETHERLANDS....50
The Law and the Safeguarding at Marriage....50
Forced Marriage....51
CRIMINALITY....55
POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS....61
CONCLUSION....65
Thanks....67

Daphne Franks biography

I have been campaigning against predatory marriage for ten years, after our family's lived experience of my mother undergoing a predatory marriage. A sixty-seven year old man married her in secret when she was when she was almost ninety-two years old. She was suffering from advanced vascular dementia and terminal cancer.

I taught English and Drama for several years in secondary schools and then taught student doctors for many years at Leeds Institute of Leeds Medical Education. Communication skills are my main area of knowledge but I also taught on another non-clinical course about key elements such as teamwork, leadership, patient safety, safeguarding, change management and the importance of processes and procedures. I realised that this knowledge, plus my experience in working with groups of all sizes, was very relevant to a campaign to change the law and procedures around marriage. Fired by a tremendous and continuing sense of injustice, I began campaigning in 2016 and have now given over 350 talks nationally and internationally, plus have made many media appearances.

Executive Summary

After a family tragedy, I have been campaigning for change in the laws and procedures around marriage since 2016, with particular emphasis on civil marriage.

There were three main problems that I identified:

1. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, marriage revokes a will. If you make a will and then marry, your will is gone, as though it had never existed. You have therefore, effectively, died intestate. Your new spouse, at the time of your death, would also inherit the first £270,000 of the estate, (that was in 2016: it is now £322,000) plus everything in your house, plus complete control of your funeral – burial or cremation, venue, who is invited to attend – everything.

   I knew that in some countries marriage does not revoke a will and I wanted to find out what are the advantages or disadvantages of this. In other countries, the law has changed fairly recently so marriage used to revoke a will but no longer does so. Where this has happened, I wanted to know if the legal change has created any new problems.

2. A lack of safeguarding at marriage
   Safeguarding at marriage was very minimal when I began campaigning and civil registrars had no training in safeguarding, or in assessing mental capacity: and yet they are expected to assess mental capacity to marry at every wedding they conduct.

   I wanted to find out if safeguarding at marriage was better in other countries, and, if so, what procedures were in place to ensure this.

3. Knowledge about dementia was very minimal, even in senior professionals such as some solicitors.

Solutions

The key solutions that I would suggest are:

a) a change in the law so that marriage would no longer revoke a previous will
b) changes to make “undue influence” easier to prove
c) improved safeguarding at marriage
d) better training for registrars and for their role to be professionalised
e) training in dementia and how dementia may present for professionals of all kinds
f) a definition of what exactly is meant by “capacity to marry” and how it would be demonstrated at the wedding ceremony. What do you have to be able to understand, or to say, or to do?
g) A link with Power of Attorney to allow notification of a planned marriage
h) Evidence should be kept at marriage – a video-recording or at least an audio-recording of the ceremony. This would protect both the couple and the people conducting the ceremony and also enable prosecutions for predators.

INTRODUCTION

When we first started our campaign, back in 2016, we were told repeatedly that we were trying to solve a problem that didn't exist. There was no such thing as predatory marriage, I was told. I must have got it wrong. Conversations and letters from that time are lodged permanently in my head.

"Yes, but did she actually have a *diagnosis* of dementia? Because if so, there's no way she would have been allowed to marry."

"In the registrars' professional opinion, she was fit to marry."

"You say you had Power of Attorney and yet you didn't know about the wedding? That can't be the case – you would have been told about it."

"What do you mean, your mother's name was Joan? We have it down as Jean."
"No, it wasn't Jean, it was Joan."
"Are you sure?"
"Yes, completely certain. She was my mother. I have always known her name."
"Well, why have we got it down as Jean then?"
"Perhaps someone in your office mistyped it?"
"I'm afraid we can't do anything without the death certificate."
"I don't have the death certificate, I'm afraid. The man who married her in secret has it."
"Sorry? Anyway, we can't do anything, then. Goodbye."

"You just need to get that marriage annulled. Have you thought of getting a solicitor?"

"What do you mean, marriage revokes a Will? Of course it doesn't. Your Will's your Will. Marriage wouldn't affect it."

I'll come back to these later, because they are all wrong in one way or another, and all distressing. Other comments were even more distressing, such as a phone call, in very casual tones, from the Crown Prosecution Service:

"No, you can't have a Victim's Right to Review, because you weren't the victim, your mother was. And she's dead."

Another phone conversation, this time from the Local Government Ombudsman, after an explanation of how all proper procedures had been followed, apparently.

Me: "But how could my mother have been allowed to marry? My mother couldn't answer most of the questions at marriage. She had advanced dementia."
Local Government Ombudsman: "Well - - so *you* say."

A friend of ours asked her solicitor if she could put something in her Will to stop it being revoked by any future marriage, and explained to him what had happened to my mother. She was told that if that had actually happened, it would be a random one-off case, and there was absolutely no point in trying to do anything about it, because it would never happen to anyone else.

There was so much denial that it had ever happened. So much lack of interest. So many procedures that were barely there, and if they were, they were barely enforced.

So who's to blame for this? After a lot of research and reflection, I arrived at the conclusion that it was no particular group. No particular individual. The laws and procedures around marriage have simply failed to keep pace with the ageing population and consequent huge rise in dementia.

Marriage in the UK, I would argue, used to be considered as much more of a business transaction than it is now, and the literature of previous centuries reflects that. A well-known example is Mrs Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, desperately trying to find wealthy husbands for her daughters so they wouldn't end up homeless and have to become governesses. "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife" is its iconic, ironic opening line.

These days, marriage is often thought to be all about love, and beautiful dresses, and happy-ever-afters. People spend an absolute fortune on weddings – the average is around £21,000, and that is without the rings or the honeymoon. Clearly that special day is very important to many people.

Some other topics around marriage make people feel uncomfortable. Nobody wants to think about the financial implications of marriage, or its effect on funerals. Nobody wants to think about dementia, or about the phrase "capacity to marry." "Predatory Marriage" is most certainly not a phrase that enters most people's worlds. Sadly, it forced itself into our world and has remained there ever since.

Predatory Marriage – A Definition and Description

We borrowed the term “Predatory Marriage” from Canada – more specifically, from lawyers Kimberly Whaley and Albert Oosterhoff in Toronto. They have written extensively on the topic for over a decade, such as here: https://welpartners.com/resources/WEL-2018-STEP-predatory-mariages.pdf

There are clear definitions of the term “predatory marriage” in this excellent document, such as in the introduction: “preying upon those older adults with diminished reasoning ability purely for financial profit.”

Financial profit is definitely a large motivating factor, but I now believe that control is very much involved too. Control of the person they are marrying and also control over that person’s relatives.

I have, over the past ten years or so, spoken to relatives of many cases of predatory marriage and in general they all tell me very similar stories, with slight variations.

This is what happens. There may be variations in the details, though the essence is usually very similar.

An older person (whom I shall call Older Person) is living on their own – perhaps their partner has died, or perhaps they didn’t have one. They are lonely. They are aware that they getting older and are struggling to cope with daily living. Often they don’t have relatives nearby - though, as in our own case, sometimes they very much do! Older Person may well have some form of dementia, though sometimes this has not yet been diagnosed.

A younger person – male or female - appears on the scene quite suddenly, looming out of the darkness, seemingly wanting to help. Sometimes they are employed as a carer, so I am going to call them Carer. Sometimes they are not actually employed as a carer, but it’s generally the term that they use to explain their role in Older Person’s life. “Older Person isn’t coping too well these days, and I am his/her carer.” They are much younger than the person that they are supposedly caring for. It doesn’t take long before Carer starts paying Older Person a lot of attention and telling them how lovely and generally wonderful they are. Carer now starts giving Older Person presents, and cards, slowly at first and then as a positive avalanche. Older Person isn’t quite sure what is going on, but is most certainly finding this attention enjoyable.

Carer meets some of the older person’s family and is really friendly to them. Using their first name twice in every sentence, for example. Putting a reassuring hand on their shoulder. The family don’t really know what to think about this new situation. Older Person seems happy with it mostly, but is a bit confused.

Carer finds out the older person’s interests, hobbies, religion; and coincidentally, to Older Person’s amazement and delight, the younger person’s interests, hobbies, religion match theirs exactly. Incredible! Now, Carer is spending more and more time with Older Person. Suddenly Carer is living in Older Person’s house, occasionally reminding them that he or she agreed to this. Older Person isn’t quite sure but after all they are a bit forgetful these days, so maybe they did agree to it.

Over time, Older Person becomes more confused. The family members, Carer explains to Older Person, repeatedly, are not, sadly, as nice as the carer first believed. Unfortunately, the family do not care about Older Person at all. They are only after their money. It's probably not a good idea for the family to visit too often. At the moment, when the family visit, says Carer, they just march in with no regard for Older Person's privacy. "Let's keep the door locked, shall we?"

Then they take Older Person down to the register office to give notice to marry. Older Person might not be sure about this but Carer reassures them that they have agreed to it previously after full discussion.

Older Person may struggle with the answers to basic questions, both at the notification of marriage and, a few weeks later, at the wedding itself. Carer explains to the registrars, however, that Older Person is very old and sadly his/her family just don't care about him/her - - but then explains that Carer loves Older Person. This, on many occasions, is enough for the registrars to go ahead. Carer comes over as very genuine and loving. This is Older Person's last shot at a happy relationship – isn't it wonderful?

Registrars – not surprisingly – are concerned about the 2005 Mental Capacity Act which they know a bit about, and it states that you should presume that a person has capacity unless they demonstrate that they don't. How does this apply here? They are really not sure. What should they do? Carer is charming, very persuasive and persistent, and the registrars have several other weddings today – they can conduct up to a dozen a day - and, as often, they feel somewhat rushed. Should they stop the wedding, or should they continue with it?

When I give talks, I always ask – especially of those who are minded to blame the registrars – "What would you have done in their position?" If registrars show one tiny bit of doubt about whether to continue then the predator will do their best to make them feel absolutely terrible.

The results, if they do continue with the wedding, are shocking. There have been many articles written by solicitors and newspapers about predatory marriage and this one, by Rothley Law, explains the legal situation.

https://www.rothleylaw.com/articles/the-predatory-marriage-trap/

Here is another excellent article, by Sarah Young of Ridley and Hall:

https://ridleyandhall.co.uk/predatory-marriage-a-guide-to-a-new-form-of-financial-abuse/

This is the essence of the basics of the legal situation:

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland marriage revokes a will. So if you make a will and then marry some time later, your will is gone completely, as though it never existed.

You have, in effect, died intestate.

Your new spouse will now inherit the first £322,000 of your estate (at the time of my mother's death this was £270,000) and everything in your house: all your personal possessions, all your furniture, everything.

As I write this I am thinking of the items of sentimental value in my mother's house – my wedding dress. Books. The letters my grandfather wrote from the trenches of the First World War. There was nothing of real value but hardly a week goes by when I do not think of some item, some book, some piece of furniture and then I think "Where is it?" - - and then, I have the gloomy realisation that it was in my mother's house.

Your spouse will also have complete control of your funeral – when and where it takes place, what kind of funeral – burial or cremation, for example – and who is invited.

Our Story

I want to explain why I found such a strong need to campaign, so I am going to to describe what happened to my mother, and why it was so horrific for the whole family.

This is my mother.



My mother, Joan Blass (d.o.b. 20th April 1924) died at home on March 26th, 2016. She was three weeks away from her ninety-second birthday, and had advanced vascular dementia, which had been formally diagnosed five years earlier. She also had terminal cancer of the peritoneum. Both conditions were mentioned repeatedly throughout her medical notes, of which I have a copy.

This is an extract from a letter written by my mother's oncologist, fourteen months before the marriage. Her dementia, as with many cases of dementia, had become even more advanced over those fourteen months since Dr. Siller wrote the letter.

From Dr.C. Siller, Department of Clinical Oncology, St. James' University Hospital, Leeds:
It is apparent that Joan does not have the capacity to make a decision about further treatment. This is because she cannot retain the information either about her cancer or about the treatments discussed.

The day my mother died, 26th March, 2016, was Easter Saturday. Everything went quiet over the Easter weekend and then, when everything opened up again on Easter Tuesday, we got a phone call from my mother's doctor. He sounded worried. He said "Daphne, did you know that your mother was married?"

We lived next door to my mother. We saw her several times a day. My husband and I had bought the old family home, a Victorian detached house in a suburb, from my parents in 1999. My family had originally purchased it in 1959 when I was three. It had been my childhood home and I had great affection for it. The house had a very large garden and in 1999 my parents had a house built in the garden. For a year, my parents, my husband and I, and our son, who was then age ten, all lived together in the old house and then my parents moved out and into the new one in 2000. I have just one sibling: my brother Michael, who lives in Amsterdam with his family. We are very close in spite of the physical distance.

This worked really well for a number of years. We were like one family split across two homes and went in and out of each other's houses at will. Sadly my lovely father, Ron Blass, died in 2008, age 85, and after that my mother lived by herself – but saw us all the time, several times a day.

My mother, Joan, was an amazing lady. As a teenager she was an Olympic hopeful in swimming in her home town of Barrow-in-Furness, but this was during the Second World War and in April 1941, the local swimming pool was bombed and destroyed, putting an end to her competition hopes. My mother continued with her swimming, however, and swam in pools and sea until she was ninety. Here she is at eighty-nine, diving into a swimming pool.



Joan was highly intelligent and very academic. She was awarded a scholarship to Leeds University, where she edited the student newspaper and was captain of the hockey team. After graduating, she worked as a journalist in London for a while and then came back to Leeds and married my father, who was a pharmacist: she had met him during the year he spent at university as part of his course.

She became a very much-loved teacher, firstly in secondary schools and later in primary schools. She was endlessly kind, and very keen on social reform. At the age of 68 she had a major stroke, but, perhaps because of her great underlying level of fitness, she made an excellent recovery.

At the age of 80 she could walk five miles easily.



In the year before my father's death in 2008 Joan became more forgetful and more confused and this was really not like her. Her personality changed, too – she became sometimes very smiley and compliant and sometimes hysterically angry. "It's disgusting!" she would cry, about many things. What she was really upset about what the gradual loss of her mental faculties. She had prided herself on her intelligence all her life. I found her decline very hard to witness.

This progressed over the next few years – she had at least two more strokes, each leading to a downward plummet in her mental ability.

In March 2011 she had a formal diagnosis of vascular dementia. Looking back, we could see those signs had been there for several years. "Oh, the hole in my head!" she would say.

A man seems to have met her by the garden gate at the end of 2011 and pretty soon he appeared to be living with her, though it was hard to tell what exactly was going on as my mother couldn't remember. As for the man, he gave very vague answers to every question. He paid her lots of attention and she was enjoying that: but we did not trust his motives. We could tell that he was much younger than she was but he was very evasive about his age. I asked the direct question. "How old are you?" "Ohhhh - - - seventies," was the reply. It turned out that at that time he was 62 and my mother was 87.

I should like to emphasise that I am not against relationships, or marriage, where there is a big age gap between the couple. What is crucial, though, is that both parties have mental capacity to marry and that neither party has been groomed or coerced. I would argue strongly that when one party is extremely elderly then those conducting the wedding should take particular care.

We did not know what to do. We sought expert help. We sought it repeatedly, from Social Services, from my mother's GP practice, from the hospital when she was being treated for cancer, from the family solicitor and from the police.

I have been asked many times since, “Why didn’t you go to the Court of Protection?” It seems amazing to me now, but I had never heard of it. Nobody mentioned it to us. The general feeling I got from those I approached was that I was just making an unnecessary fuss.

Most people did not understand the threat. If anyone visited, the man was absolutely charming to them. We were constantly reassured that the man would not be able to do anything bad, and that he clearly adored my mother. The organisations did not work together so there was never a concerted effort to look at the overview of the situation. Now, still, I think constantly that I should have done more, researched more, pushed more. The relatives of other cases of predatory marriage all say similar things.

“People will say you just don’t like him,” said one policeman, on our second visit to the police. I felt that I was being pigeonholed and thought of as the evil, money-grabbing daughter, only interested in the inheritance. I tried to explain that it was a safeguarding issue: I explained how old she was, how vulnerable she was. I felt that they thought that I was the problem, not the man. I felt totally crushed.

In 2014 the man said to me, “You don’t care about your mother, and everyone knows it. When she dies you will cry crocodile tears.”

That phrase haunts me to this day, as no doubt he intended. We had always been known as a very close family. We lived next door. We went on holiday together every year. We saw each other all the time. How could people think this of me?

These days, the word “gaslighting” is in common use, but over a decade ago I simply didn’t realise that this was what was happening to me. The term comes from the 1938 stage play, *Gas Light*, where a husband systematically manipulates his wife into thinking she is going mad by turning the lights in the home, which are powered by gas, up and down and then denying that there has been any change in the light level. Manipulation from my mother’s predator made me think that everyone was beginning to have the contempt for me that he so clearly demonstrated.

The witnesses at the wedding were one of the man’s sons and a lady the man knew from the pub he visited. Some years later, a registrar said to me “We don’t need to assess mental capacity to marry – that is what the witnesses are for.” I think she really believed this but it is not the case at all. In ancient Rome you would need ten witnesses, apparently, to validate the marriage and to prevent couples marrying in secret. Now, however, although witnesses are indeed necessary for a legal marriage, in a civil wedding they are not there to assess capacity to marry: their signatures just attest that “this wedding took place”. Often they are friends or relatives of the couple, but not always. So although the man’s son might possibly have had a vested interest in the marriage taking place, as he might stand to inherit in later years, there was nothing wrong legally with him being a witness. My mother did not know the lady from the pub, but again, there was no requirement that she should.

The quotation from her consultant’s letter, above, was written fourteen months before the wedding. If she did not remember that she had cancer, how could she possibly, fourteen months later, have had capacity to marry? Here are the relevant sentences again:

It is apparent that Joan does not have the capacity to make a decision about further treatment. This is because she cannot retain the information either about her cancer or about the treatments discussed.

Many – perhaps most - people who have cancer think of it constantly. The fact that my mother just did not remember that she had this very serious illness shows how far her cognitive faculties had declined. The man is referred to as her "carer" in this letter. That is how he always described himself, even after they were married, and once he said that "carer" word no professional ever asked another question – nobody asked "How did you come to be her carer?" Nobody asked "Are you *employed* as her carer?"

When I am asked, as has happens frequently, by professionals at the many talks that I now give on the topic of predatory marriage, "What can we do to find out if the person is a predator?" I always suggest "Ask one more question than you are comfortable with," and see where that leads you. Professional curiosity is vital.

After my mother's death, when the secret marriage came to light, there appeared to be a sudden realisation by many parties, including the authorities that we had approached previously, that an absolute disaster had happened.

The man inherited my mother's entire estate, plus everything in her house.
He did not invite us to the funeral. Nor did he tell us when or where it was, so we could not go.
My mother had always wanted to be cremated. He had her buried.
A friend of ours tracked down her grave. The man has never put up a headstone and we were told we are not allowed to put one up as he owns the grave plot.



My mother's grave is the empty patch of grass in the middle.

I thought that the man had found all this remarkably easy to do, and that therefore others must surely be doing it too. It struck me as a problem with safeguarding of the elderly.

For a number of years I had taught non-clinical topics at Leeds Institute of Medical Education and I was aware from my work there that, when a medical disaster takes place and someone dies, the media are often quick to claim that all staff involved must be fired from their work immediately. I knew that this is rarely the solution – usually, lack of training, poor procedures and lack of understanding are often the problems. Better procedures and better rules can go a very long way to preventing such disasters in future. I knew that the big rise in cases of dementia was relatively recent and thought there could be a parallel here with marriage – perhaps the laws and procedures had not kept pace with the number of people with dementia. I decided to investigate.

I started researching and came across the term "predatory marriage" in some Canadian documents, which gave a perfect summary of what had happened to my mother. We set up a website www.predatorymarriage.uk and started hearing from very many cases. Then we went to our MP,

Fabian Hamilton, who raised the case in Parliament in a Private Member's Bill in November 2018: the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Consent) Bill (https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2317)

Fabian Hamilton was then contacted by from the relatives of many more cases, and so were we.

The Bill had complete cross-party support and was passed unanimously for a second reading but then, like many Private Member's Bills, ran out of Parliamentary time.

Fabian Hamilton has raised the topic in Parliament twice since, however, and we have made gradual progress in reform over the past ten years. We are very grateful to him and to his team.

I realised fairly early on that there was a huge lack of awareness about predatory marriage nationally – I still kept being told that it really was not a "thing": it could not possibly have happened. "Did your mother actually have a *diagnosis* of dementia?" Then I would explain that yes, she did, she had a five-year history of it, mentioned repeatedly throughout all medical records, and that I have a copy of these. After that I would explain that a diagnosis of dementia would not, in itself, mean that someone did not have capacity to marry. Some people in the earlier stages of dementia definitely do have capacity to marry. People were, in general, very surprised by all this.

It occurred to me that one of my skills – after years of teaching groups of adults – was in talking to people. I decided to start giving talks and media interviews and this has really snowballed over the years. I have now given over 350 talks, both nationally and internationally, and have also done podcasts, webinars and many media interviews, both radio and television. Here is one example, from Channel 5: *Inheritance Wars: Who gets the money? Episode 3* (https://www.channel5.com/show/inheritance-wars-who-gets-the-money#state=5)

I am delighted to have these opportunities to raise awareness, even though I would never have chosen that dreadful title for the Channel 5 documentary!

I never name the man who married my mother, for two reasons. The first one is that he has not been prosecuted, though I do think that he should have been. It does not seem fair for me to name him, though. Innocent until proven guilty.

The second reason, and the one which is actually more important to me, is that I do not want, and have never wanted, our campaign to be about him. It is about my mother and all the other people, male and female, who have been victims of this crime.

My aim, when I applied to the Churchill Fellowship, was to find out if predatory marriage had been happening in other countries too. I suspected that, with the global rise in cases of dementia, then it probably had been.

If it had, then what have other countries done to prevent predatory marriages? Have these methods worked? When changes have been made, what have been the results?

I taught a small amount of Change Management to student doctors. I knew from this that, sometimes in an organisation, someone has what appears to be a good idea and then a change is suddenly brought in – but then no statistics are kept and no checks or follow-up are done to see if the change has actually brought about improvement.

I was aware from the research that I had already done that some other countries had changed their laws so that an existing will would no longer be revoked by marriage. I wondered whether there had been any resistance to this. In the early days of our campaign I was told repeatedly by some legal professionals that “everyone knows” that marriage revokes a will, and hence “everyone knows” that if you marry, then you might need to make a new will.

Now I was being asked to give talks to different groups of people – social workers, Police, NHS professionals of all kinds, registrars, solicitors, will-writers, charities for the elderly and general-interest groups such as Women’s Institutes and Soroptimists.

Gradually I was coming to understand that, far from everyone knowing that marriage revoked a will, very many people did not know. Some were shocked by being told this: others were prepared to tell me with great authority that, as previously mentioned at the beginning of this report (p5):

“What do you mean, marriage revokes a Will? Of course it doesn’t. Your Will’s your Will. Marriage wouldn’t affect it.”

How I chose the countries to investigate

When I applied to the Churchill Fellowship, I knew that the first country that I wanted to explore was Canada. I had learned that some provinces had changed the law so marriage would no longer revoke a will and I wanted to know what effect this had had. I had been campaigning to stop marriage revoking a will – was anyone in Canada campaigning to change the law back again?

Also, of course, the term "predatory marriage" originated in Canada and I wanted to know if there was a particular reason it had originated there, and what had been done since to prevent predatory marriage in Canada.

The next country I thought of investigating was the Netherlands, where marriage does not revoke a will and – as far as I have been able to find out – never has done. I do not speak Dutch but my brother has lived in Amsterdam for many years and speaks fluent Dutch, which I thought would be helpful. I wondered what the safeguarding at marriage in the Netherlands looked like, and if predatory marriages happened there.

I considered investigating France, where the systems are different from here: marriage does not revoke a will and there is also a system of "forced heirship" where you are not permitted to disinherit your children. In the UK you can. In the UK we have what is known as "testamentary freedom" when, in theory at least, you can leave your estate to whom you wish. Here is an article that explains it: https://www.longmores.law/articles/what-is-testamentary-freedom/

I was then asked to speak at a national solicitors' conference in Chicago, USA (https://rptecleconference.com/) as part of a whole morning of presentations about predatory marriage. (The website is currently confusing – this year's conference, 2026, was in Chicago – it is next year's that is in Atlanta!) I had heard that laws protecting the elderly were better in the USA and I wanted to find out if this helped prevent predatory marriages. Of course, it also presented an excellent opportunity to explore marriage laws and procedures there, so I changed countries from France to the USA.

Purpose of this report

I'm delighted that currently reform is proposed, both to wills (https://lawcom.gov.uk/project/wills/) and to marriage. (https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/tying-the-knot-reforming-weddings-law-in-england-and-wales)

The Government gave an initially positive response to the Wills Bill in May 2025 but was supposed to give a full report by May 2026 – it has not yet done so. So much thought and work has gone into it and I hope that the Government will report back soon. Two key proposals as far as predatory marriage is concerned are to stop marriage from revoking a will, and to make "undue influence" easier to prove.

The Weddings Law consultation ended on September 24, 2026. It builds on the Law Commission's 2022 report: Celebrating Marriage: A New Weddings Law. (https://cdn.websitebuilder.service.justice.gov.uk/uploads/sites/54/2025/12/A-new-weddings-law-LC-report.pdf)

I am aware, however, that still too many people know very little about the laws, processes and procedures around civil marriage, which is why I am still giving very many talks to raise awareness. I should like my report to be read by people from all kinds of organisations. For example: solicitors, will-writers, police, registrars, celebrants, doctors, nurses, NHS workers of all kinds, anyone who works with people with dementia. I should also like it to be read by members of the general public. Marriage affects everyone, either directly or indirectly.

I am aiming to make this report readable by those who lack knowledge of legal and medical jargon. I have tried to write it in clear, lay language – it is not an academic document, though I have worked hard to make it accurate!

The number of people with dementia is rising rapidly. According to the Alzheimer's Society, approximately 982,000 to a million people are living with dementia in the UK. (https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/blog/how-many-people-have-dementia-uk)

With our ageing society, numbers are bound to rise further. Reform is needed, and it's needed now. I want to raise awareness, to provoke discussion, and to hasten reform.

Dementia

I was shocked by the lack of knowledge about dementia that I came across during my mother's illness and also after her death.
I am not going to write a long explanation here but I do think I should include a brief summary, since there was so much lack of knowledge of it when my mother was suffering from dementia. It isn't just "the forgetfulness of old age" which is what my mother's predator tended to say to describe her behaviour.

Whenever I mentioned my mother's dementia to the man who married her, he reacted as though I was insulting her, as though I was criticising her and saying that she was "mad". I do not know whether he actually knew as little about it as this, but his whole approach was "how dare you be so rude about your mother?"

There are many different kinds of dementia but it is a physical illness of the brain rather than a psychiatric disorder. Some of the more common ones are Alzheimer's disease, vascular dementia (which is the kind my mother had), dementia with Lewy bodies, and many others including mixed dementia, where more than one kind is present.

Symptoms can include memory loss, confusion, disorientation (often worse at around dusk in what is known as "sundowning"), language and communication difficulties, behavioural changes including aggression, paranoia, hallucinations and others. Not just forgetfulness.

Some people – and my mother was one of them – learn to cover it up, to "mask" it, early on. She had prided herself on her intellectual ability all her life and now she was losing it, and she could not bear it. So she smiled a lot because she realised that people ask you far fewer questions that way. If you did ask her questions, she almost always did not know the answer and often said "I suppose so." By chance, a couple of weeks before the secret marriage, I had timed her to see how long she would remember something: it was four minutes. We had taken her on holiday with my brother for a few days in Skipton, North Yorkshire. "Where are we?" she would ask. "We're in Skipton, Mum." "Oh, that's nice." (She did think the Yorkshire Dales were – well, okay, though she thought they were nowhere near as good as her beloved Lake District near her home town of Barrow-in-Furness). Then, four minutes later, "Where are we?" "We're in Skipton, Mum. We're on holiday." "Oh, that's nice."

I must emphasise that I am a teacher, not a clinician, but I had picked up some good lay knowledge about dementia from my work at the medical school, and I had also done the Dementia Friends training when it was offered to me there (https://www.dementiafriends.org.uk/websession). As my mother's condition progressed I read more about dementia, and how to deal with it. For example, people with dementia often ask questions such as "When will my husband be home?" The answer should not be "Don't you remember, he died ten years ago?" because that just breaks the bad news all over again. I found that distraction was the best way when my mother could not remember something, or remembered it wrongly. I still found it incredibly difficult.

We are often told "It is possible to live well with dementia" but I found it incredibly sad to watch my mother's deterioration. In the early stages she had more self-awareness "Oh, the hole in my head!" she would repeat and it was heartbreaking. Later on she just seemed lost, both in time and in place. By the end she could not remember my father, to whom she had been married for fifty years.

With regard to the man who married her in 2015, she never mentioned him but would occasionally say vaguely “There are people about.”

Even in the early years before and after her diagnosis, though, she understood far less than she appeared to know, as the lady from the Memory Clinic found out when she started asking my mother basic questions. “Where are we?” “Do you know what season it is?” and my mother could not answer any of them.

Not all people with dementia are good at covering it up, of course – but even so, “professional curiosity” would have helped all the people who encountered her, because it only took a couple of minutes of questions to work out that something was badly wrong with my mother’s cognitive abilities. It was a sad, sad end to a very lively life.

My approach to the investigation

Rather to my surprise, in the early years of our campaign many people were very reluctant to talk to me. I have never set out to blame any individual, or any group, for what happened, but even so, some people assumed that I must be determined to find people to blame and get them fired from their jobs. I got the impression that some people thought that I was stirring a pot that they would much rather was not stirred. I was surprised that people thought my campaign was controversial – to me it was, and still is, all about safeguarding the elderly from fraud and abuse.

I have always made the point that I have nothing financial to gain from reforms. It is too late for us. The man has succeeded. He prevented us from attending my mother's funeral, and inherited all my mother's estate. He has, I would suggest, achieved everything he wanted. The more that I have learned about predatory marriage, the more I think it is about control as well as about money. My mother's predator achieved both control of my mother and of her family, and he has inherited all her worldly goods.

A few years ago someone was interested in making a television drama about what happened to my mother. She emailed me to say that she wanted to change the drama so that the story would have a "happy ending". "Audiences like happy endings," she said. She was suggesting something along the lines of all the family joining together to somehow make the predator go away. I found this suggestion utterly distressing and simplistic, and, quite frankly, insulting. If there was something simple that we could have done, we would have done it!

The progress that has been made to stop predatory marriage happening to others does make me feel better, however. I still hear very frequently from relatives of other vulnerable people to whom it has happened, and I want it to stop happening. The stress, distress and financial loss is almost impossible to describe to people who have not been through it.

My approach to investigating other countries, therefore, was simply to try to persuade as many people as possible with relevant knowledge and experience to speak to me. I approached people with what I hoped was an extremely non-threatening email explaining that I was researching the laws and procedures around marriage. Some replied immediately and were incredibly helpful: others either did not reply or just did not want to talk to me. I did not attempt to record meetings as I knew that people would talk less freely if I did, but I did make extensive notes immediately afterwards.

THE UNITED KINGDOM

Before I explain what I found in other countries I need to give a short account of what I have found in the United Kingdom during my ten years of campaigning.

How many cases of predatory marriage are there?

Especially in the early days of our campaign, I was sometimes accused of "using a sledgehammer to crack a nut."

"You want to change the law? But surely that's a very drastic change when there are just a few cases of this kind of thing?"

The answer is that nobody knows how many cases there are, because no authority is formally looking for statistics.

However, I hear from a new case every couple of weeks – and those are just the ones who have tracked me down, of course.

In 2020, *File on Four* on Radio Four made a programme about the issues and interviewed 176 solicitors, who said that they had dealt with 98 suspected cases in the previous year. There are roughly 200,000 solicitors in the United Kingdom, and though of course not all of them will deal with such cases, it still suggests that there is a large, hidden problem.

I have been asked why the relatives of other cases don't usually speak up in the way that I have done. This was often said with a slight implication that ours must therefore be the only case that exists. There are, I suspect, many different reasons including the predators' success in persuading people that the relatives don't care, and the way this affects the relatives. If the relatives have been to court, they have almost always lost. Any publicity results in hideous comments on social media. The comment that I remember best was on social media after I appeared on *Steph's Packed Lunch* (Channel Four) and the clip was shared on Facebook. There were many supportive and positive comments but this is the one that has stuck with me:

Writing about me, one commentator wrote: (She is) "nothing but an entitled money-grabbing adult brat". I have always stated that our campaign is not about regaining our lost inheritance, but this comment hit hard and I will always remember it.

Solicitors are now writing about predatory marriage very often (just search "predatory marriage" on the internet and you will see!) because predatory marriage is the "sharp end" of a huge pattern of elder abuse, which has increased because of various factors. I don't know what all the factors are, but I am certain that some of them at least are these:

- The increasing numbers of people living to a very old age.

- Modern life, where children often live a long distance from their parents and do not see them that often.

- The Covid pandemic, which isolated people and seems to have led to an increase in "romance fraud" of all kinds.

- The fact that many of the so-called "boomer" generation – those born soon after the Second World War – in general did well for themselves. They had good jobs, acquired significant wealth and bought a house which then soared in value. I have heard it mentioned several times that we are living in an "inheritocracy". These people are now elderly and often vulnerable, and are good targets for unscrupulous predators.

I am sure that there will be other reasons too. Yes, of course there are neglectful and uncaring sons and daughters. Many people's immediate assumption is that I must have been one of them, and this assumption is both infuriating and extremely distressing. Predators will exploit this assumption as much as they possibly can.

Early articles about predatory marriage tend to conclude with the rather simplistic advice that children should keep a close eye on their parents. Well, we lived next door, saw my mother several times a day and the predatory marriage still happened. Better laws and better procedures are needed.

Also, there is no such crime as "predatory marriage" and I will discuss later how it might be framed so the predators can be prosecuted. At the moment there have been no criminal prosecutions.

Laws, unsurprisingly, tend to be written in legal jargon, which can be difficult for lay people such as myself to understand, but I have had clear explanations from various helpful legal professionals over the years and here I aim to give a short and very simple overview of the relevant elements.

The Law

Although the UK (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) is tiny compared to some countries, laws can still differ. Marriage revokes a will in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, unless it explicitly states that the will was made "in contemplation of marriage". What this means is that if you make a will and then get married, your will is gone, as though it never existed. However, marriage does not revoke a will in Scotland. The situation there is not simple, though: a surviving spouse in Scotland still has prior rights to a part of the estate, including the family home up to a specific financial limit.

The law in England and Wales stating that marriage revokes a will dates from the 1837 Wills Act, section 18. 1837 was a long time ago: Victoria became Queen on June 20, 1837 and the Wills Act passed into law less than two weeks later on July 3, 1837. There have, of course, been massive changes in society since 1837 and this is why I believe that this law is no longer fit for purpose and is ripe for reform.

Marriage revoking a Will is a huge, easy incentive for predators. Marry someone who is very old. Don't tell anyone that you have done it – keep it secret. Wait for them to die. Inherit lots of money. At the time of my mother's marriage, the new spouse would automatically inherit the first £270,000 of the estate and that amount has now increased to £322,000. They would also inherit everything in the person's house – all the furniture, all the possessions.

After the first £322,000, then half of the remainder would pass to any surviving children. If the deceased had no surviving children, then the entire estate would pass to the spouse.

For those people who do not make a will – or whose will is revoked by a marriage - and who die intestate, the above rule applies.

The spouse is also entitled to be appointed as the deceased's Personal Representative, which gives them complete control of the victim's funeral – what kind of funeral, when and where it takes place, who is told about it and invited to attend.

In many other countries – Scotland, France, the Netherlands, Poland as examples - marriage does not revoke a will.

A solicitor from Poland said to me at a recent conference, in tones of surprise:

"Oh yes, in the UK you haven't fixed that yet, have you?"

When I first began campaigning, however, I did meet some resistance, mostly from legal professionals, with regard to possible legal change.

Marriage revoking a will is such an integral part of many solicitors' knowledge that some found it hard to understand that not everyone knows that marriage revokes a will. I have, at the time of writing, given approaching 350 talks about predatory marriage. At each talk now I ask, having explained that marriage revokes a will, if the audience members knew this previously. In every case more people are unaware of this than know about it. Just occasionally someone has argued indignantly that I must be wrong about this, as previously mentioned in the introduction to this report (p5):

"What do you mean, marriage revokes a will? Of course it doesn't. Your will's your will. Marriage wouldn't affect it."

There are arguments for keeping the law as it is, and the ones that I have heard are as follows:

The Law assumes that if you remarry, you would want to provide for your new spouse upon your death. If a previous will remains unchanged after marriage, then you might accidentally leave everything to, for example, a former spouse, and therefore accidentally disinherit your new one. So, because most people do not update their will immediately after they remarry, marriage revoking a will acts as a "safety net".

Also, a new marriage is usually a big change in life circumstances, so I have heard it said that it is a good thing that people have to rethink their will after marriage.

Some legal professionals think that abolishing the rule that marriage revokes a will would lead to a big rise in court claims under the Inheritance (Provision for Family and Dependants) Act 1975 to claim "reasonable financial provision" from the estate.

https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1975/63

Only spouses or civil partners or children of the deceased, or dependants of the deceased, may claim. Spouses would receive more than children here: children would only receive what is

required for maintenance at a reasonable standard. Here's a helpful detailed account of what might happen in the UK:

Rothley Law article: https://www.rothleylaw.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/1975-Act-Guidance-Note-Adult-Child.pdf

In practice, this means that if any children have good jobs and are capable of providing for themselves, they are not likely to achieve much, if anything, under this act. That's the part that counts – not what they might feel they deserve, or what seems fair, or how close they were to their parent, or whether they were estranged from the parent.

The spouse, however, would do better: courts can look at what the spouse might receive in a divorce, taking into account the age of the person claiming and how long the marriage had lasted.

Perhaps it is the case that there would be a rise in '75 Act claims – but, in the case of a predatory marriage, it would require the spouse to take action in order to inherit, with no guarantee of success. At the moment marriage automatically gives a predator the first £322,000 of the estate and, as previously mentioned, all the contents of the house plus complete rights to the funeral. In our case, it enabled the predator to keep saying smugly "I am Joan's personal representative" and, although this might seem a trivial point in the middle of everything else, I know that many other family members of people who have had suffered predatory marriages find such gloating statements add considerably to their distress: it most certainly did to mine.

I think that marriage automatically revoking a will is old-fashioned and paternalistic in a "we have decided that this is best for you" way. Also, at the moment, because the level of mental capacity to marry is lower than that needed to make a will, it is possible for someone to marry while lacking mental capacity to make a will. They might then realise their will has been revoked by the marriage, but then not have capacity to make a new will. It is also, of course, the case that a person who lacks capacity to make a new will could marry and thus revoke their old Will – which is effectively the same as making a new one!

For me, however, a key point is that nobody tells you what happens to your will upon marriage. If you happen to know, that is because you have come across the information somewhere, by accident, like I did.

If there were a procedure that you were told clearly and repeatedly, in writing and by the officiant, before your wedding, that your will would be revoked by the marriage, and what the consequences of that could be, that would certainly help. At the moment, however, this does not happen at all. You are just supposed to know, and yet nobody tells you.

I wanted to find out if people in countries where the law has changed, or where marriage has never revoked a will, find it a problem.

Void and Voidable

I want to come back to something that was said to me in the early days after my mother's death, that I mentioned right at the beginning of this report (p5). The man who said it was a highly educated man, but he was, just – like many who gave me well-meaning advice at the time! - lacking in knowledge in this area and hence making assumptions!

“You just need to get that marriage annulled. Have you thought of getting a solicitor?”

I need to mention that there is a difference between void and voidable where marriage is concerned. Under the Matrimonial Causes Act 1973, a marriage involving lack of capacity or lack of consent is voidable, not void. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1973/18

A void marriage, to use the Latin which is still commonly used in matters of law, is regarded as void *ab initio* (from the beginning). This means that it is as though the marriage never existed. There are some grounds that make a marriage void, such as bigamy, or if one party was underage (the minimum age for marriage was raised from 16 to 18 in 2022 to help to protect against forced marriages).

A voidable marriage, however, is valid until a party (and it has to be a husband or wife – it cannot, for example, be one of their children) actively applies to the court to have it annulled, and it has to be during their lifetimes, not after one of them has died. Further, even if you could annul the marriage, (which you can’t, unless you are one of the couple) it would not then be void from the beginning, and because marriage revokes a will, the will would remain revoked.

This took me a bit of “getting my head round it”.

It basically means that if you are a predator and marry someone, and keep it secret until they die, there is really nothing that the family can do about it.

Here’s a useful legal article about this:

https://gatehouselaw.co.uk/predatory-marriage-the-great-inheritance-scam/

I suspected that in the UK, at the time of my mother’s marriage, there was not enough awareness of safeguarding at civil marriage. I thought “how would I apply to become a registrar?” I looked it up. At the time there was no mention at all of safeguarding in any information that we found – it was all about giving a couple a lovely marriage ceremony.

What we could have done before my mother’s death

Statutory Will

We could have applied to the Court of Protection for a statutory will, since we knew that my mother lacked capacity to make a new will herself.

Why didn’t we do this? Firstly – incredible though this seems to me now! - I had never heard of the Court of Protection, or of a statutory will, so I didn’t know to ask about it. None of the people we went to for help – police, NHS, social services, the family solicitor - mentioned the idea to us, either because they had not heard of it or they did not take the threat seriously.

We knew that my mother already had a valid will. Although we knew that marriage revokes a will, and we knew that the level of mental capacity to marry is lower than that needed to make a will, we had been repeatedly reassured, by professionals who could see how very low her level of capacity

now was, that she would not be able to marry. Cost of a statutory will can be very high – thousands and thousands of pounds – but we did not get as far as worrying about the cost, because we had not heard of it at all.

Caveat in Expectation of Marriage

We could have gone to the local registrars and asked about a "caveat in expectation of marriage". Once this is registered, the superintendent registrar cannot issue a licence to marry until they have investigated the objection. None of the professionals we approached mentioned this to us, but anyway we had been reassured that the man would not be able to marry her and we did not know that there was anything we could put in place. However, at the time of my mother's wedding, that caveat would only apply to that particular register office so the predator could, with a bit of effort, take the victim elsewhere to marry them. I am assured that this caveat is now a national scheme, though little-known outside of registrars and solicitors. I am not sure how thorough the investigations are, however. If the Registrar General considers your caveat to be "frivolous" you are liable for the costs of any proceedings and financial damages to the couple.

Here is some (not very easy to read!) information from the Marriage Act, 1949:
https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo6/12-13-14/76/section/29

Safeguarding at Civil Marriage

When I started investigating safeguarding at civil marriage, I was shocked: it seemed to be very minimal, with rules that were not clear. It seemed to me, back in 2016, to have somehow been forgotten in the safeguarding training that was developing throughout the country at that time.

When, three days after my mother's death, we learned of the secret marriage, our whole family was shocked and horrified. My mother's dementia had progressed to the stage where she had really no knowledge of anything. When she saw family members, her face lit up but she could not have named us or explained our relationship to her. Her knowledge of the man who had moved into her house was an occasional, vague mention of "there are people about".

Our son wrote to the register office where they married to enquire how she had possibly been allowed to marry, and received a reply which included this sentence.

"In the registrars' professional opinion, she was fit to marry."

The profession of which I had most knowledge was the medical profession, because I had taught at Leeds Medical School for many years. I knew that they were taught to assess mental capacity. I was aware that the profession is governed by strict rules and guidance, and I knew that they were tightly regulated and the rules were laid out in Good Medical Practice, a document from the General Medical Council.
https://www.gmc-uk.org/cdn/documents/good-medical-practice-2024---english_pdf-102607294.pdf

If there was a problem they sometimes had to attend a "fitness to practice" hearing. Did any of this kind of training and accountability apply to registrars?

I researched the work of registrars and spoke to some, on the promise of anonymity. I found that they were not trained in assessing mental capacity, or in safeguarding. Descriptions of a registrar's work at weddings were all about making sure that the couple had a lovely time, and that all the correct forms were completed with accuracy. They did have some training in forced marriage (the kind that people usually understand when they hear the term – a young lady, often from an ethnic minority, being pressured to marry against her will). They had some training in sham marriage for immigration purposes. When when I mentioned dementia, they were horrified – clearly this had never occurred to them.

Registrars are nowhere mentioned in the Government list of professions: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/professions-regulated-by-law-in-the-uk-and-their-regulators/uk-regulated-professions-and-their-regulators

I was told that registrars can conduct up to a dozen weddings a day. How are they supposed to assess capacity to marry in the short time allowed to them, immediately before the ceremony, with no robust techniques to do this and no proper training?

In 2016 when my mother died, the terms "grooming", "gaslighting", "coercive control" and "undue influence" were not well known: they are much better known now.

Marriage is now generally regarded as a hearts-and-flowers happy-ever-after procedure. Romantic novels always tend to end in a lovely wedding. I remember the incredible sentimentality around Prince Charles's marriage to Lady Diana Spencer in 1981. The general public just did not associate "marriage" with "safeguarding".

In the UK, for a civil marriage, both parties must go, in person, to sign a legal statement to give notice of marriage. They should be interviewed separately at the notification of marriage and also on the day of the wedding. There's no definition of what "separately" means. A few feet apart? In different rooms? Separate interviews, in different rooms, are not yet mandatory, but they should be – it is basic safeguarding, allowing the registrars to talk to each of the couple, individually, in private. Many registrars do separate the couple completely – but sadly, not all of them do.

Registrars did have guidance to follow at the time of my mother's wedding, but it was not clear, partly because there was not – and still is not! – a clear definition of what is "capacity to marry". Solicitors will readily explain that capacity to marry is much lower than that needed to make a will – but what do you have to be able to understand in order to get married? How are you to demonstrate that you understand it? How are registrars supposed to *check* that you understand it?

I know from my work in medical education that if you go to the hospital with, for example, a broken arm, you need to give "informed consent" to treatment. For surgery you always need to sign a consent form. Doctors are taught how to obtain informed consent for any procedure, and how to check that the patient understands to what they are consenting, using such techniques as "chunk and check" – explain a chunk of the information, and then check that the patient has understood it before moving on to the next part.

Is getting married as important as having surgery, or any other medical procedure? I would argue strongly that it is. Marriage has such ramifications, both emotional and financial, and such an effect on a person's life (and I speak as someone who has been happily married for forty-six years!) You are indeed supposed to be able to give "informed consent" to marriage – but how is this to be assessed?

At the time of my mother's marriage, registrars were supposed to check that both parties had the mental capacity to consent to marriage, and to stop the wedding if they had any doubts about this.

From a letter from Andrew Dent, then Director of Civil Registration and Deputy Registrar General, sent to me on 20 November 2018:

Furthermore, if a registration officer is of the opinion that either of the parties to the marriage does not understand the nature of the marriage contract due to mental disorder, it is their duty to stop the proceedings.

The letter concludes:

I trust the above reassures that we take issues of willingness and mental capacity to enter a marriage seriously and sufficiently addresses all the issues that you have raised.

This letter did not reassure me in any way at all and its dismissive tone and concluding sentence infuriated me. If all these issues were taken so seriously, how had my mother ever been allowed to marry? At my mother's wedding we know from a letter written by the registrars long afterwards, after the Police had got in touch with them, that my mother could not answer some of the questions. She did not know her age, or her house number, for example. The man who married her had explained beforehand that she had a stroke, and that she was hard of hearing – and, of course, that she was very elderly, nearly ninety-two. He did not mention her diagnosis of dementia.

The second registrar asked the first registrar about the decision to continue with the wedding and this is what their letter says about that:

When the couple left the room after this initial interview, the DSR (Deputy Superintendant Registrar) asked me if Mrs Blass was fully aware of why she was there and should we proceed with the ceremony. I replied that in my opinion based on the interview, how the information had been given and her demeanour, we should go ahead.

Registrars were not trained in assessing mental capacity, or in safeguarding. Yet they were, in effect, expected to assess mental capacity to marry in a few minutes, at every wedding they conducted. How, without thorough training or robust procedures, were the registrars supposed to arrive at the "opinion that either of the parties to the marriage does not understand the nature of the marriage contract"?

The fact that one of the registrars quoted my mother's "demeanour" as a reason to continue with the wedding demonstrates the registrar's lack of understanding of how dementia can present. As I have mentioned previously, my mother, like many people with dementia, developed a "masking" technique early on. Just keep smiling, and people will ask you far fewer questions.

It can be extremely difficult for the registrars. Here is "A Guide for Authorised Persons" for registrars, from the General Register Office:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/682467d7b9226dd8e81ab829/A_Guide_for_Authorised_Persons_May_2025.pdf

3.12 A person should understand:
(i) that they are taking part in a marriage ceremony and understands the words used;

(ii) the nature of the marriage contract. This means the person must be capable of understanding the duties and responsibilities which normally attach to marriage.

That's fine as far as it goes but where is the detail? How is it currently checked? What questions should registrars ask to establish that "they are taking part in a marriage ceremony and understands the words used"? How should they check that they "understand the duties and responsibilities which normally attach to marriage"?

It also states in this document:

3.13 A person's mental capacity ***will have been assessed and considered at the time they gave their notice of marriage.*** *However, if at pre-marriage questioning you have any concerns, you should immediately discuss the matter with your local superintendent registrars or GRO (General Register Office) who will be able to advise you further. A marriage cannot proceed if a person does not have the mental capacity to marry.*

Again, how is mental capacity "assessed and considered at the time they gave their notice of marriage"? What questions are asked in order to do this? It is all extremely unclear. If you compare the training of a doctor, or even of a solicitor, in assessing mental capacity with the training of a registrar, there is absolutely no comparison. Solicitors have a "golden rule" that if they are struggling to assess capacity, they must involve a doctor. Registrars, at the time of my mother's wedding, were told to ring the General Register Office, their headquarters, for guidance if they were struggling, but it was a "should" rather than a "must".

The document also makes this point:

3.14 A key principle of the Mental Capacity Act 2005 is that a person must be assumed to have capacity unless it is established that he/she lacks capacity. It should never be assumed that because a person has a learning disability, that they lack the capacity to marry.

That is very true. Many people with a learning disability wish to marry and can understand what marriage is. This is one reason why the capacity "bar" for marriage is deliberately low. It can work well, for example, with someone with Down Syndrome whose mental capacity is the same all the time.

The *My Marriage My Choice* project was an excellent two-year project with a practice guidance toolkit for assessing capacity to consent to marriage, from Rachael Clawson, Associate Professor in Social Work, https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/sociology/people/rachael.clawson and the Ann Craft Trust.
https://www.anncrafttrust.org/resources/my-marriage-my-choice-resources/

Registrars are concerned that they will get into trouble if they stop a wedding. They often have an expectant audience in front of them. There is a very real fear that they could be prosecuted for making the wrong decision. One registrar told me recently that she had officiated at a wedding that she thought was clearly a sham marriage for immigration purposes. However, they do not have the statutory power to stop such a marriage, just to report it. Therefore they cannot be criminally prosecuted for allowing it to go ahead when they do not have the power to stop it.

They do, however, have the power to stop a ceremony on a few grounds (legal impediments, such as one party already being married, or missing paperwork). And, of course, if they believe that one party lacks capacity to marry. They fear that they will be prosecuted if they get it wrong.

Also, the Mental Capacity Act points out that someone with capacity to make a particular decision has the ability to make an unwise decision if they wish. Many people have attended weddings thinking "oh dear, that marriage is never going to last!" but the person still has the right to marry if they have capacity to do so and have not been pressured into it.

It is a minefield for registrars. I can see why one registrar commented "All I care about is if they can say the words *I do*."

What is "capacity to marry" anyway?

Capacity to Marry

This has been a subject that has been debated with increasing frequency as the number of people with dementia increases, and it is a key place where safeguarding professionals, medical professionals and legal professionals should come together.

I have found that when I have asked legal professionals, the first thing they generally say is “Well, it’s lower than the capacity needed to make a will.”

At the moment it is indeed lower – but should it be?

A case that is often quoted from English law is *Durham v Durham, 1885*, which was all about the Earl of Durham arguing that his wife lacked the required mental capacity to consent to marriage at the time of their wedding. The judge, Sir James Hannen, dismissed this, saying that the contract of marriage is “a very simple one, which does not require a high degree of intelligence to comprehend.”

Here’s an article, written in 2018 by Sarah Young of Ridley and Hall Solicitors, which was one of the first that I read about predatory marriage, and it still sums it all up beautifully:

https://ridleyandhall.co.uk/predatory-marriages-elder-financial-abuse/

With dementia, mental capacity can fluctuate for different reasons, including the time of day. There is a group of behavioural symptoms called “sundowning” which can lead to increased confusion and disorientation and these typically happen at the time the sun sets in the evening.

Theoretically, therefore, someone could, for example, appear to have capacity to marry in a brief window of morning time, but not in the evening.

I have spoken to a number of relatives of elderly people who have got married one day and then did not remember they were married the next day. My mother never knew she was married at all and I do not believe that she had capacity to marry when she did marry. The registrars who conducted the wedding asked me, when I finally met them, “How do you know she didn’t know she was married?”

Here are the reasons why I knew that she was unaware of the wedding. She never, ever mentioned it. She was still wearing the wedding ring my father had given her until the day she died. Immediately after the wedding, the man took her to Blackpool for a few days (a place she always hated, incidentally!) and then called in at her brother and sister-in-law’s house near Manchester on the way back. The wedding was never discussed or mentioned or referred to in any way. My mother would never, ever have kept such a big event a secret. When I met the registrars who conducted the wedding, one registrar commented “Well, you don’t *have* to tell people that you are married.” This was deeply distressing and, quite frankly, insulting to our mother’s memory and to our whole family. My mother loved her family and, when of sound mind, would never have made such an important decision without letting us know.

If a person has dementia, and – unlike my mother, I emphasise - appears to understand during the ceremony and to have capacity to marry, but does not remember anything about it afterwards,

should the marriage be valid? One solicitor in Canada to whom I spoke was very emphatic "Of course it's valid! It's a contract!" But should it be? That is my question.

One lady who got in touch with me had found out about her father's marriage, which had taken place the previous day, by visiting him and noticing some "Congratulations on your wedding!" cards on the mantelpiece. Incredulous, she asked him about them.

"Oh no!" he said. "What have I done?" He had no memory of it at all.

Quoting from the 2005 Mental Capacity Act:

The fact that a person is able to retain the information relevant to a decision for a short period only does not prevent him from being regarded as able to make the decision.

At the moment capacity to marry is judged during a snapshot of time – did you have capacity to marry at that particular moment? We were told that decisions, under the Mental Capacity Act 2005, are time-specific and decision-specific.

This idea comes from the best of intentions. People often talk about someone who has "lost capacity" as though they have no capacity to do, or to understand, anything. That is not how it works. They may have capacity to make certain decisions, but not others. They may be able to understand "Would you like a cup of tea?" but not to understand what marriage is. The argument has been made that because someone has been married before – as my mother had, for over fifty years – must mean that they understand the principles of marriage. This judgement does not work in the case of someone with dementia. This is especially so because marriage in some countries currently revokes any previous will – does the person who is getting married know the effect this will have on their finances? Or the effect on their funeral?

There are many different kinds of dementia, presenting in different ways. We really do not yet know enough about how each person with dementia perceives the world. We just do not know what my mother was thinking at the time she said "I do". Did think she was twenty-four again? Did she think she was having a lovely day out? We just don't know.

This is from an article by Michelmores Solicitors:

https://www.michelmores.com/contentious-probate-insight/when-does-someone-have-capacity-to-marry/

Capacity is time and issue specific. It is perfectly possible for a person to have capacity in relation to some decisions but lack it for others. Further, a person may have capacity to make decisions about something at certain times of the day, for example in the morning, but lack capacity to decide upon that same issue by the evening. Mental capacity is a gradient. Every effort should be made to encourage and support the person making the decision themselves, even if a lack of capacity is established.

This "snapshot" assessment at marriage does not work for someone with dementia. I don't think, for example, that an idea to have the wedding in the morning because the person with dementia is more alert then is fair. I am not criticising the writer of this article – what I am saying is that I don't think these procedures necessarily work for someone with dementia when they are making the life-changing decision of marriage.

The statutory test for determining whether someone has mental capacity is set out in the Mental Capacity Act, 2005: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2005/9/section/1

Here are the principles:

(1) The following principles apply for the purposes of this Act.
(2) A person must be assumed to have capacity unless it is established that he lacks capacity.
(3) A person is not to be treated as unable to make a decision unless all practicable steps to help him to do so have been taken without success.
(4) A person is not to be treated as unable to make a decision merely because he makes an unwise decision.
(5) An act done, or decision made, under this Act for or on behalf of a person who lacks capacity must be done, or made, in his best interests.
(6) Before the act is done, or the decision is made, regard must be had to whether the purpose for which it is needed can be as effectively achieved in a way that is less restrictive of the person's rights and freedom of action.

How would it be possible for registrars to take all this into account in a few minutes' interview before marriage?

Also from the Mental Capacity Act:

For the purposes of section 2, a person is unable to make a decision for himself if he is unable—
(a) to understand the information relevant to the decision,
(b) to retain that information,
(c) to use or weigh that information as part of the process of making the decision, or
(d) to communicate his decision (whether by talking, using sign language or any other means).

A recent case discusses whether someone might have capacity to marry in general, or simply might have capacity to marry a particular person, and there is an interesting article about it here, by Mr Robert Wheeler of the Department of Clinical Law at University Hospital, Southampton. https://www.uhs.nhs.uk/health-professionals/clinical-law-updates/capacity-to-marry

This case concerned a woman in her eighties living with vascular dementia, depression and a hoarding disorder, and her partner who was twenty years younger. The local authority sought to block the planned marriage, claiming that the man was mismanaging her finances.

Robert Wheeler writes that a clinical neuropsychologist reported that:

because of an impairment of or a disturbance in the functioning of EKK's mind, she lacked the capacity to make decisions about '…the care she received, her residence, cleaning and rendering her house habitable, contact with others, managing her property and affairs…' but that she could make decisions relating to entering into marriage and sexual relationships. It might be construed as curious; the notion that on one hand EKK could not make decisions relating to contact…whilst '… at the same time … she had capacity as to whether or not to marry.'

There are very many cases that I could mention but I am just referencing this one to demonstrate how tricky it can be to assess capacity to marry. The judge eventually decided that the capacity to marry must be decided as "act-specific" rather than "spouse-specific" – in other words, did the lady

understand about marriage itself, rather than whether she could evaluate the specific merits or risks of marrying that particular man? But I would argue – and I am sure that some of the relatives of people who have suffered predatory marriages would back me on this - that it all demonstrates that it is their working definition of "capacity to marry" that's not quite appropriate here. If this lady was unable to do or to understand all those other things about looking after herself etc, did she really have capacity to marry?

The *Durham v Durham* case was a long time ago: over a hundred and forty years ago. Far fewer people had dementia and far, far less was known about it. Society has changed in so many ways since then.

As previously mentioned, (p17) at the time of writing the Ministry of Justice has recently had a consultation into weddings. There is emphasis on safeguarding against forced marriages, sham marriages and predatory marriages and I hope that this consultation will result in a whole new approach to assessing capacity to marry.

https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/tying-the-knot-reforming-weddings-law-in-england-and-wales

I should mention that predatory marriages are not, of course, the whole picture of abuse of our ageing population. In the ten years since I began campaigning, "romance scams" have become very well known. Often lonely people are persuaded that an online relationship is real and then they are asked to send money, in increasing quantities, to apparently solve some problem that their so-called partner has.

Abuse of Power of Attorney is becoming either more common, or more often identified: Professor Carolyn Stephens has been campaigning to highlight this abuse https://www.linkedin.com/in/profcarolyn-stephens/ and Fabian Hamilton MP https://members.parliament.uk/member/415/contact has raised the issue in Parliament.

Carolyn Stephens' father's case is interesting – though very sad, as all the cases are – because the predator had tried to marry him, but the registrars did not go ahead as they were concerned about his mental state.

Here's a link to a BBC article: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-67773394

"He couldn't answer even basic questions about his own address, his bride's date of birth, where or when he was supposed to be married," says Carolyn.

This is startlingly similar to my mother's marriage – but the registrars at Carolyn's father's wedding followed their own procedures more closely, and stopped the wedding.

The same week, however, Carolyn learned that the woman who had tried to marry her father now had Power of Attorney over his affairs: property, finance, health and welfare. To give Power of Attorney, you are supposed to have enough mental capacity to understand the consequences – but the system is open to abuse, and there is a growing understanding of this.

CANADA

Background

I cannot remember exactly when I first came across the term “predatory marriage”. In the grief and horror of the aftermath of my mother’s death, when we learned what had happened to her, many people were saying to me – sometimes even trying to be helpful - “Oh no, that cannot possibly have happened”. Some people in high-up positions of authority (and I am not going to name them, because my purpose in writing this is not to find people to blame) said exactly the same thing.

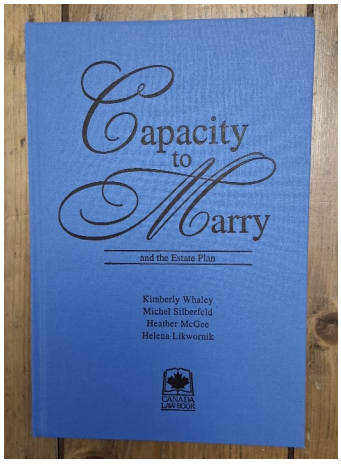
As mentioned previously in this report, I thought that that the man who married my mother had found it remarkably easy to pull off this secret marriage. So I started researching on the internet and it did not take me long to find that a key person with knowledge was the extremely experienced and well-respected Professor Albert H. Oosterhoff in Toronto, Canada.
https://welpartners.com/resources/WEL_oosterhoff_bio.pdf
This led me to Kimberly Whaley and Whaley Estate Litigation Partners in Toronto.
https://welpartners.com/people/whaley

I learned that the term “predatory marriage” originated in Canada in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and was originally described in legal articles using terms such as “care-giver marriage” or “age-discrepant marriage”. In many, perhaps most, cases, the predator is either employed as a carer, or calls himself or herself a carer. They perhaps find, like my mother’s predator did, that as soon as you say “I’m his/her carer” many people are reassured and ask no difficult questions.

There is usually an age gap – sometimes a massive age gap, such as in the recent case in England of Langley v Qin, where the victim, Robert Harrington, was 94 at the time of his death in May 2020, 11 months after marrying his “carer” Guixang Qin, 54. A huge age gap does not necessarily mean that a marriage is predatory, of course – but I think it should be noted as a “red flag” that it might be. Many people at 94 have some degree of cognitive impairment: the amazing Sir David Attenborough, a hundred years old and still broadcasting, is a real rarity.

https://ridleyandhall.co.uk/predatory-marriagewhat-can-we-learn-from-the-recent-case-of-langley-v-qin/

Kimberly Whaley and colleagues have been working on predatory marriage for a number of years and in 2010 wrote the book *Capacity to Marry and the Estate Plan*. I’m delighted to say that when I met her she gave me a copy.



In the preface she writes:

The notion to write a book on predatory marriages from a legal perspective, and on the capacity to contract marriage, first occurred to me in our about 2006 when in my practice I began to see several cases per year concerning marriages of a predatory nature, with all the usual hallmarks of abuse.

This was some years before the term “predatory marriage” became known in the UK, of course.

When I was awarded the Churchill Fellowship I immediately wrote to Kimberly and she kindly agreed to meet me in Toronto. Kimberly and her team have been incredibly helpful.

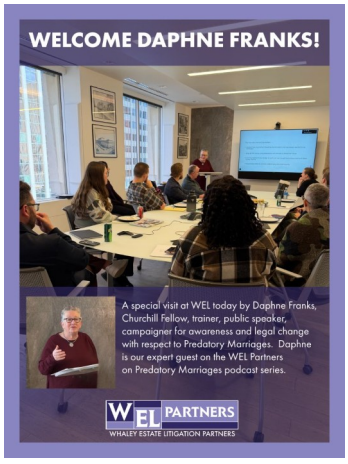
The laws in Canada are often very similar to those in the UK and court decisions in the UK are often quoted in Canada.

Before I travelled to Canada, Kimberly invited me to make a series of videos for the WEL Partnership about what I had learned about predatory marriage in the UK. The excellent Jaclyn Holdsworth, https://welpartners.com/people/holdsworth who was then a summer student at WEL Partnership, interviewed me and we made several episodes, covering what happened to my mother, the other problems caused by predatory marriages, the predators’ patterns of behaviour – which, as outlined previously in this report, are usually very similar in essence - and the assumptions people made that really there would be “something in place” to prevent such marriages. It was fantastic to have this opportunity.

1) Joan’s Story
2) Revoked Wills Aren’t the Only Reason
3) Patterns – Part 1
4) Patterns – Part 2
5) Assumptions
6) Could Joan’s Story have Happened in Canada?

They may be found on their website, here:

https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/wel-partners-on-predatory-marriages/id1839333173



When we visited Toronto we met all the team who were in the office that day, and I gave my talk about my mother’s story and the progress made since in bringing about change. Kimberly remarked that it was really interesting to hear the story from the client’s point of view. At one point she asked me “Did you ask him to leave?” I could see that, like many people, she just could not understand why we had not done this.

I am never quite sure how to explain why we did not in a way that will make sense, but that is always one of the tricky things for relatives.

I explained how in the early days, when the man came on the scene, we were always worried, but my mother seemed happy with it. He gave her cards, flowers and other gifts and even – having worked out that she liked poetry - wrote her little poems. She would stuff them in her handbag and afterwards did not usually remember where they came from, but she was enjoying the attention. I had not, at the time it happened, heard the term “love-bombing” but that is what it is called.

He seemed to be looking after her well, but we were suspicious. After a while I began to feel really bad that I did not trust him, as most other people seemed charmed by him. Should we ask him to leave? My brother, my husband and I discussed it frequently. We felt that any such conversation would come over to Mum like this:

“Well, Mum, you’ve been lonely since Dad died even though we live next door. Now you have an attentive new friend but we don’t trust him so we are going to get rid of him.”

We were worried about upsetting Mum. We were also worried about upsetting the man, and about him taking it out on Mum, and how if we asked him to leave he would come straight back and Mum would let him in because she would not remember. She thought initially that he was some kind of carer, if she thought anything at all – at one point she asked “Did you get him for me?” and I felt terrible.

Much later we realised that the only real solution would have been to sell both houses and move away to a different city, but we did not think at the time that this would be remotely necessary.

It was good to have the opportunity to explain all this to these interested Canadian lawyers. I noted at the time that these lawyers had reacted to the story of my mother’s marriage in a very similar way to all the various audiences in the UK to whom I had given talks. They seemed equally shocked – I somehow had not been expecting the shock from people who were used to the term “predatory marriage” and knew that such things happened but I felt that they understood how horrific it had been for us, and that they were not blasé about it.

WEL Partners in Canada have done a tremendous amount of work on predatory marriages. Other lawyers in Canada to whom I spoke, such as Eric Hoffstein, tended to say “You need to contact Kimberly Whaley”, even though Eric Hoffstein himself was very helpful!

I also approached other lawyers in Canada, safeguarding organisations, age charities, and over a hundred wedding officiants. I sent what I hoped were tactfully-worded emails to wedding officiants asking to discuss marriage procedures. What happens at pre-marriage interviews? What forms are needed?

The Law and the Safeguarding in Canada

I was told a number of times in Canada that much of Canadian law is based on British law, with some influences from French law in some places, for example Quebec where French is spoken. Some Indigenous nations also have their own laws.

A few lawyers told me that Canadian law is lagging behind British law: but that does not apply to marriage revoking a will. In many provinces in Canada, I would argue, the law is ahead of that in the UK, in that the law has been changed so that marriage no longer revokes a will.

Here is a short video about predatory marriage from the newspaper the *Toronto Star.* The video was made before Ontario changed its law so that marriage no longer revokes a will there.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TiESEwqp2ec

Many provinces have their own marriage legislation. Kimberly Whaley’s team has done a tremendous amount of work analysing this in their document *Capacity to Marry in Canada: Cross-Provincial Examination of Marriage Legislation*. (https://welpartners.com/resources/WEL-CHART-Capacity-to-Marry-Legislation.pdf)

From this document, most provinces have something in their legislation about when officiants should not carry out a wedding: this, from Prince Edward Island:

PEI at section 23 of its Marriage Act makes it a summary offence to issue a licence or solemnize a marriage where the issuer knows or has reason to believe that either of the parties to the intended marriage is mentally incompetent.

And yet, in the legislation for Prince Edward Island there is:

No definition of "capacity" or "capacity to enter into a marriage"

In the Northwest Territories there is a fuller description of what officiants need to do. It will be a "summary offence" – a less serious criminal offence under the Criminal Code of Canada which is tried in front of a judge but with no jury - if they do not do it. At least it does say that they should "meet with each of the parties separately", though it does not define "separately" and in my opinion it would be better if it said "in separate rooms where the parties cannot see or hear each other".

Per section 19, the issuer of a marriage in NWT shall meet with each of the parties separately to ensure they understand the contents of the licence and its significance. Section 43 holds that an issuer shall not issue a marriage where they know or have reason to believe either of the party to the intended marriage is ineligible or incapable of freely consenting or under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Section 45 makes it a summary offence to issue or solemnize a marriage contrary to the Act.

However, in the legislation for the Northwest Territories there is, again:

No definition of "capacity" or "capacity to enter into a marriage"

And for the remote and sparsely populated Nunavut:

Section 18 holds that no one shall perform a marriage ceremony and no person shall go through with a form of marriage with any other person in Nunavut where they know or have reason to believe that either of the contracting parties are incapable of giving a valid consent.

And, again, in Nunavut there is:

"No definition of "capacity" or "capacity to enter into a marriage"

These are just a few examples. To summarise: in province after province, lawmakers have written a version of how officiants should not perform a marriage ceremony if someone lacks capacity to marry or is unable to give valid consent.

There is, however, little or no practical guidance from the provinces as to how officiants are supposed to establish this. How are the officiants at a wedding supposed to establish capacity to marry, or the lack of it, when there is no clear definition anywhere?

Marriage Revoking a Will

A number of provinces have updated their laws so that marriage no longer revokes a will. Just a few examples: in Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario, Quebec, Saskatchewan, marriage no longer

revokes a will. In Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, marriage does revoke a will.

In Canada I spoke with Greg Blue and Kevin Zakreski from the British Columbia Law Institute: both Senior Staff Lawyers. I was sorry to hear that Kevin Zakreski sadly died earlier this year.

In British Columbia the law to stop marriage from revoking a will came from a report in 2006 and was passed in 2009, coming into force in 2014.

I asked them specifically whether changing this law had caused any issues. Greg Blue said that he was "not aware that it caused a problem".

They explained that public education material has adjusted to the change where marriage does not revoke a will, and that there was a lot of public education around the time of the Act. Apparently lots of other ideas for improvement came from the time of the reform. The British Columbia Law Institute conducted much work around mental capacity, most notably the *Rationalizing and Harmonization of British Columbia Common-Law Tests of Capacity (2013)*.

https://www.bcli.org/project/rationalizing-and-harmonization-bc-common-law-tests-capacity/

They investigated capacity to make a will, to contract and to marry – capacity to marry was the most challenging, they commented!

There is an annual "Make a Will Week" to publicise it all, which I think is an excellent idea.

I have been unable to find any *Bring back marriage revoking a will!* (my italics) kind of movement or campaign in Canada, but I do believe that the key to making any change is publicity. At the moment in the UK there is no publicity drive to explain that if you marry, your will is revoked. If the law changes so that marriage would no longer revoke a will, a big Government publicity drive would really help.

I met Detective Martin Franssen who, at the time, was Older Adult Support and Investigative Service Detective for the Durham region. I described the characteristics of perpetrators of predatory marriage in the UK and he was very familiar with them. He also commented, on the topic of the perpetrators, "They never stop. They don't know how to stop," before saying that there is no workable law in Canada under which to prosecute. He said that when there is not enough evidence to bring a case he would pull them up on everything else, for example their car, to at least show that the police were keeping an eye on them. The predators, he commented, often have a somewhat reckless approach to the law and think it does not apply to them. This was indeed true of my mother's predator who, for example, frequently drove without a seat belt.

In order to marry in Canada, couples need a marriage licence. How one is obtained, however, varies widely between provinces.

In British Columbia, for example, you must buy a marriage licence within three months before your wedding date, and it costs a hundred dollars. When you buy it, the you need to produce "primary identification" for both people who are getting married: examples include birth certificate, immigration form, permanent resident card, citizenship card.
The ceremony must be performed by a licensed marriage commissioner or religious official. You need two witnesses over the age of 19.

All this is fine.

However, I see a big safeguarding issue here, and it is that only one person needs to apply for the marriage licence. He or she must apply in person and take the necessary identification for both parties with them. It is the same in other provinces, such as Ontario – just one person needs to attend. In some provinces, however, such as Saskatchewan and Manitoba, both people need to attend.

Having just one person attend is a great opportunity for predators. My mother's predator had moved into her house and had easy access to all necessary documents: it is the same for many predators. Sometimes they are paid carers or housekeepers. Sometimes, of course, they just claim that they are. Either way, they have no problem rummaging through documents to find the correct ones. So only requiring one person to turn up to apply for the licence makes it very easy for a predator to obtain one without the inconvenience of having to take the potential victim with them. Of course, when the procedures were originally drawn up, nobody was thinking about the possibility of predatory marriages.

In the UK, in contrast, both parties need to give notice to marry in person, which is how it should be. They should have separate interviews when notice is given – and by "separate" I mean in different rooms where they cannot see or hear each other. Certainly, at the time of my mother's marriage, this was not always done.

Then we move on to the wedding itself, which is usually a few weeks after the licence has been obtained.

There is some guidance available for officiants. In Ontario, for example, there is the *Marriage Officiant's Guide to Performing Marriage Ceremonies in Ontario*.
https://forms.mgcs.gov.on.ca/en/dataset/on00459

The guide itself points out that the guide does not replace the Marriage Act, and that where there is a discrepancy, the Marriage Act will prevail. https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/90m03

In the Marriage Act it states, under the heading *Persons Lacking Mental Capacity*:

7 No person shall issue a licence to or solemnize the marriage of any person who, based on what he or she knows or has reasonable grounds to believe, lacks mental capacity to marry by reason of being under the influence of intoxicating liquor or drugs or for any other reason. 2006, c. 19, Sched. G, s. 4.

The "for any other reason" would include dementia, as long as the person's dementia was so far advanced that they lacked capacity to marry. This document is of course written in legal language and is not easily understood for someone without legal training.

The Marriage Officiant's Guide to Performing Marriage Ceremonies in Ontario is generally written in more accessible language but sadly lacking in detail. This extract is from *During the Marriage Ceremony.*

Marriage Officiants must not perform the marriage for any person whom:

based on what they know or have reasonable grounds to believe, lacks the mental capacity to marry (e.g., due to being under the influence of liquor or drugs, or for any other reason),

or

they know does not consent to the marriage or if it is unclear that both parties to the marriage consent.

There is no information at all about how marriage officiants are supposed to identify a person who lacks the mental capacity to marry, or what exactly they are supposed to do if they believe they have identified such a person.

I suppose this is hardly surprising, considering that, as previously described in this section of the report, there is no definition of capacity to marry anyway!

I am not singling out Ontario for criticism – I have not yet found a province with clear guidelines, and in fact I don't think that there can be until there is a clear definition of capacity to marry.

There is, however, a section *Failure to Adhere to Legal Requirements* which quotes the Criminal Code of Canada: https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/c-46/

The Criminal Code of Canada provides for offences in relation to marriage including but not limited to: forced marriage, procuring feigned marriage, and unlawful solemnization of marriage.

Although there are cases where a couple have been married by an officiant who was later discovered not to be authorised to conduct weddings under the Marriage Act, I cannot find any cases in Ontario where an officiant has been prosecuted for either failing to stop a wedding when they should have done so, or failing to continue with a wedding when they should have done so. I am sure that they find the threat of prosecution very worrying, though.

As previously mentioned, I contacted a hundred or so wedding officiants in Canada.

One of the people I contacted was here: https://www.unboringweddingacademy.com/ which is run by Mark Allan Groleau. This is a six-stage programme to train wedding officiants. The tone may perhaps be described as jolly.

How do you write a speech that holds everyone's attention and does your couple proud? You follow the 3-act wedding story roadmap! Rather than cutting and pasting or spraying and praying, I have a proven technique for you, so you can tell your couple's story to moving tears and happy cheers.

Write a fun and moving story that will guaranteed-thrill your couple and wow their guests.

Feeling rather like the killjoy wicked witch who has just arrived at the feast, I wrote to Mark Groleau and asked him, gently, if there is any safeguarding training as part of his course. Perhaps unsurprisingly, he did not reply: but there is no mention at all of safeguarding on the website.

In the UK there are somewhat similar organisations such as the Academy of Modern Celebrancy: https://www.academyofmoderncelebrancy.com/wedding-celebrant-training/

Looking for a job that never feels like a job, where every day is filled with joy?!

In Canada, as in the UK, if an independent celebrant is not registered or licenced by the province, they cannot legally solemnise the marriage. Couples can do the legal part at a register office, city hall or with a government-licenced official, and then hire an independent celebrant for a big celebration.

I think, however, that some celebrants, even licenced ones, are aware that there is something that they could be missing, and I do think that even independent celebrant training should cover safeguarding. An overly-light tone can obscure the fact that marriage is a big, serious commitment with legal and financial implications.

In Canada, there is not just one single General Register Office as we have in the UK, but each provincial or territorial government has either the Office of the Registrar General or the Vital Statistics Agency.

Of the hundred or so licenced officiants whom I contacted, most did not reply, but the few that did rather nervously referred me to the Vital Statistics Agency for their province. I tried contacting some of these, asking about how capacity to marry is assessed but again, there were very few replies of which this one, from British Columbia, is perhaps the most helpful:

Hello,
Thank you for your email.
Our training ensures that our Civil Marriage Commissioners are aware of the legislated requirements under both the Marriage Act of Canada and Marriage Act of BC (Marriage Act). While we do not distribute the training materials themselves, we will attempt to respond to any specific queries you may have to the best of our abilities. For instance, if a marriage commissioner suspects that an individual is intoxicated and may not fully comprehend the agreement, the commissioner can offer to postpone the ceremony. Additionally, they have access to a dedicated service providers' helpline for guidance from the Agency in any specific situations.
Hope this helps! Please let me know if you have any additional questions.
Warm regards,
Kamia
Kamia Bajaj
Assistant Regional Manager, Interior and Northern BC
Vital Statistics Agency
Research, Statistics and Records Division
Office of the Chief Information Officer
Ministry of Citizens' Services

I had hoped that, because the term "predatory marriage" originated in Canada, that they might have sorted out the safeguarding as well as the law, in those provinces which have changed the law so that marriage no longer revokes a will. Sadly, this is not the case. There is no point looking for someone to blame here: what is needed is joined-up working to cover both safeguarding and the law.

But surely, people have said to me, if you remove the legal incentive of marriage revoking a will, then that will prevent predatory marriages. It will certainly help, but it is not the full story.

I have given two talks in Canada this year to Police conferences (online, sadly, not face to face!) and have been presenting with lawyer Bryan Gilmartin from WEL Partners. Bryan commented at

the first conference, LEAPPS, (Law Enforcement Agencies and Partners Protecting Seniors) in June 2026 “We’re seeing more cases like this every single day.”

He commented in his talk that it is generally held that people getting married “must demonstrate consent” but only three jurisdictions actually mention consent in their rules.

Bryan discussed the general “format” for a predatory marriage – he mentioned a significant age gap between the couple: a power imbalance: one of them with wealth: the marriage kept secret and often only revealed after death – in other words, exactly what I have found in the UK.

Bryan commented that many predators aim to get Power of Attorney for property/finances, personal care/health or both, because this gives them a lot of control over the victim. Again, isolating the victim from the family is key here.

My conclusions from my Canada research are that, where the law has changed so that marriage does not revoke a will, it does not appear to create any new problems, provided that the new law is well-publicised.

Safeguarding at marriage in Canada still needs a lot of work. Bryan Gilmartin and Kimberly Whaley’s team are currently – November 2026 - putting together a training document for registrars. This, along with LEAPPS (Law Enforcement Agencies and Partners Protecting Seniors) is the kind of cross-professional initiative that is needed everywhere.

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

In 2025 I was asked to record a short version of my talk about predatory marriage for a lawyers' conference in the USA. It was well-received and I was asked if I would be interested in giving a longer version of my talk in person at the 38th Annual National CLE Conference and Spring Leadership Meeting in 2026 in Chicago.

https://rptecleconference.com/

It was part of a whole morning of presentations about predatory marriage involving legal experts from all over the USA. The fact that a legal conference was devoting a whole morning to it was fascinating to me in itself, since, as previously mentioned, when I first began campaigning in the UK back in 2016 I was initially met with "Oh no, that can't have happened" swiftly followed by "Yes, but did your mother have a *diagnosis* of dementia?" and a somewhat patronising comment, referred to earlier in this document (p5) of "Have you thought of getting a solicitor? You just need to get that marriage annulled." That last comment, from a doctor, which was both well-meaning and totally simplistic, haunted me for years.

Clearly predatory marriage was happening in the USA, and I wanted to find out more about it.

The Law and the Safeguarding in the USA

Unlike in the United Kingdom, marriage generally does not revoke a will in the USA. If you do make your will before marrying, however, and then do not update it after the wedding, and then you die, your new spouse is called an "omitted" spouse. Every state (as with provinces in Canada) tends to do things a bit differently but in general the "omitted" spouse is entitled to a share, often the same as what they would have inherited if you died without a will, with some exceptions. For example, exceptions would be if you decided to omit them on purpose, and said so in your will, or if you signed a prenuptial or postnuptial agreement waiving the spouse's inheritance rights.

One fact that is really not well known in the UK is that marriage in the UK gives the spouse full authority over the funeral. So in the UK the spouse would not have to consult any children or even invite them. This, sadly, is what happened to us.

In the USA it is similar – there is a hierarchical order and if the deceased has not named a health care proxy or funeral agent in advance, then the spouse would have primary authority. Usually this would seem fair – but not in the case of a predatory marriage, sadly. The spouse would control everything – burial, cremation, the date, the cemetery, what happens to the ashes or where the body is buried.

I was, of course, keen to find out more about safeguarding at marriage in the USA.

What you need to do in order to marry is this:

You must apply in person at a local County Clerk's Office, (or the Superior Court in Washington, D.C.) in the state and county when you intend to marry.

Usually, you must both attend. In some places, such as El Paso, you can fill out an online marriage licence application to speed things up.

Here's a link to a short video on Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/reel/1263356669285928

You need to take some documents: photo ID, social security numbers, proof of age/birth certificate, any previous divorce decrees or death certificates if either partner was married previously. Depending upon the state and county, the cost of the licence is between $35 and $150.

So far so good. Then you must wait until the licence is issued – and here is where, in my opinion, it gets troubling. In some places the licence is issued the same day, in others there is a mandatory waiting period, though this does not tend to be long – 24 hours in New York, for example, or 3 days in Pennsylvania.

County clerks or registers of deeds are legally required to make "reasonable enquiries" to ensure that both parties are entering the marriage of their own free will.

Here is a quotation from North Carolina regulations:

According to Charles Szypszak, Professor of Public Law and Government, at the UNC School of Government, before issuing a marriage license, a Register is required to make a reasonable inquiry about the parties' eligibility to marry under the North Carolina statutes, and part of this inquiry may appropriately involve asking questions about the parties' genuine "intention to marry." A person who is "incapable of contracting from want of will or understanding" cannot enter into a valid marriage.

https://cplg.sog.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/16800/2019/10/Forced-Marriage-article-for-Registers-of-Deeds-April-12-2019.pdf

If the licence is issued the same day, or even within a few days, I cannot see how the county clerk or register of deeds could possibly make any valid "reasonable enquiry". How is "incapable of contracting from want of will or understanding" to be reliably established in that time?

In a few states, "proxy marriage" – where one or both parties are not physically present at the marriage – is allowed. California allows single-proxy marriage, though it is specifically restricted to people stationed overseas in a conflict zone. Montana allows double-proxy marriage: one party must be a Montana resident or an active-duty military member.

https://www.superlawyers.com/resources/family-law/does-my-state-allow-proxy-marriage/

Once you have obtained the marriage licence, then you need someone to conduct the wedding.

When I first started investigating weddings in the USA, people kept mentioning the TV series *Friends* to me, with reference to how Joey conducted the marriage of Phoebe and Mike in *Season 10 The One with Phoebe's Wedding* after getting ordained online.

I could not quite believe it but here it is:

https://paperlust.co/blog/how-to-be-a-wedding-officiant/

Here are the relevant quotations:

Firstly:

Before writing a single word of the ceremony, sort out the legal side. The rules vary by state, and a beautiful ceremony does not legally marry anyone if the officiant was not authorized to perform it.

But then:

For roughly 45 of the 50 US states, you can become legally authorized by getting ordained online through either Universal Life Church (ULC) or American Marriage Ministries (AMM). Both are recognized as religious organizations, both ordain anyone who applies, and both offer free ordination in minutes.

- *ULC: the older and larger of the two. Ordination is instant and free. ULC sells optional credentials (certificate, letter of good standing, wallet card) that some county clerks ask for at registration.*

- *AMM: wedding-focused, modern interface, free ordination plus free downloadable credentials. AMM is the slightly safer default for first-timers because the registration paperwork is cleaner and labeled by state.*

So I tried it with the Universal Life Church and had my certificate within three minutes, even though I gave my real address in an English city. Here is my certificate:



The Universal Life Church keeps writing to me, addressing me as the Rev. Daphne Hibberd-Franks and asking me how many weddings I have conducted.

When I was in Chicago for the RPTE National CLE Conference, as previously mentioned, I checked with a judge if this is legal. It is. The legal part is the marriage licence and then anyone who has done this "online ordination" can conduct weddings. I did point out to a rather shocked and amused audience of lawyers, as part of my presentation, that I can now conduct weddings throughout the United States, with one or two exceptions, such as Virginia, which does not accept online ordinations.

To me this seems really odd, in a country where many places hold such strong religious beliefs and where the Church is such a big part of many people's lives. I would say that this trivialises the whole concept of marriage.

Some states require extra steps, such as Tennessee:

Online ordinations not formally recognized after a 2019 law change; enforcement varies.

Of course, it all dates from before "safeguarding" was instigated anywhere. But I think it's significant that this documents describes the states (plus New York City) where these extra steps are needed, thus:

A handful of US states (and one major city) require more than online ordination. Confirm with your couple's county clerk before relying on any of the following, but here are the ***long-standing trouble spots.*** *(my highlighting)*

It's interesting that those states requiring more safeguarding at marriage are described as "trouble spots"!

After the marriage ceremony, the officiant, those getting married plus one or more witnesses must sign the marriage licence and then it is returned to the County Clerk's office or wherever you got it from. A few weeks later they will send you the marriage certificate.

Here is a short video about how to do it, from New Jersey.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WIxY3nuBPuU&t=42s

As previously stated, marriage does not revoke a will in many states of the USA. We have campaigned since 2016 for the law in England and Wales to change to stop marriage from revoking a will.

There are, however, many cases of predatory marriage in the USA so it's clear that this change, though helpful, does not, on its own, prevent predators from marrying their victims, and there are many articles about it, such as this one from Mark J. Esposito, who was presenting about predatory marriage at the Chicago conference that I attended. https://www.ssfpc.com/attorney/mark-esposito/

The article points out that when the predator is exerting undue influence on a victim, the victim may change their will or put the predator's name on his or her financial accounts. These are both classic signs of undue influence – but they are also just the kind of changes that might be made when individuals enter a loving marriage. It can therefore be very hard to tell the difference.

Here is a quotation from the article:

In the case of a marriage that takes place shortly before death, however, even if a will is disallowed for probate based on its questionable provenance, the predatory spouse could still be entitled to a share of the decedent's estate either under the laws of intestacy or as a pretermitted or omitted spouse from an earlier valid will. The spousal share, even if intended to prevent a loving spouse from being left destitute upon his or her spouse's death, can thus be used as a weapon to wrongfully claim a share of the decedent's estate.

The predator uses their undue influence to persuade the victim to make a new will. Even if the will is disallowed afterwards by a court, the predator still inherits.

Here we have another example of, as has been said to me many times in the UK, "the law protects the predator".

Mark J. Esposito rightly points out in this article, however, that:

Marriage is a particularly personal issue, and restrictions on the right to marry must be treated with great caution. This is no less true of the elderly.

In many cases, litigation can carry on for years, at huge cost, such as in the well-known case of J. Howard Marshall II and Anna Nicole Smith. She was 24 and he was 86 when they met and the legal battles went on for over 20 years.

https://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/obvious-history-anna-nicole-smith-ended-marrying-89-year-old

Mark J. Esposito comments: *As with much probate legislation, no one involved emerged looking very good.*

Another article about predatory marriage in the USA *How do I love thee, let me count the days* points out that, as in the UK, it is impossible for the children of a predatory marriage to challenge it in court after death. https://uknowledge.uky.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1285&context=klj

(Author: Terry L. Turnipseed, from Kentucky Law Journal, 2008)

This article is about a "deathbed marriage" in the USA. Associate Professor Rachael Clawson at the University of Nottingham https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/sociology/people/rachael.clawson has done research on such marriages in the UK, and I have spoken to several cases where the family's elderly loved one is dying, often in hospital. The family arrive to visit and find to their surprise that their loved one has suddenly, and unexpectedly, got married. The family are often astonished and learn later that well-meaning professionals with the best of intentions have done everything they can to facilitate the marriage, even though the loved one's capacity to marry can be very doubtful. To quote from the article:

The next logical legal step for Haft's children was challenging the validity of the marriage, or at least the property rights awarded Haft's blushing bride. Perhaps they were about to do just that when they likely discovered something seemingly peculiar about District of Columbia law: the only person allowed to challenge the validity of a marriage (or, by extension, the property consequences thereof) after the death of one of the spouses is the surviving spouse! Seems incredible, does it not? The expectant heirs of a dying man (or woman) who marries on his (or her) deathbed cannot challenge the marriage post-death. Ironically, the one person allowed to challenge is the only person who has absolutely no motivation to do so.

I had a fascinating time at the conference in Chicago, learned a lot, and also spoke to many other people in the USA: I am very grateful to them all for their time and expertise. Sadly, however, I could not persuade any wedding officiants to speak to me – I think that, as in Canada, my mention of "safeguarding at marriage" made them nervous.

Safeguarding at marriage is what is needed, however. Several people mentioned a "protective conservatorship" to me and I found a number of articles about it, such as here: https://frisellalaw.com/conservatorships-and-guardianships/elderly-parents/

The process can be complex and courts tend not to grant them easily: also, they are expensive and costs can escalate to tens of thousands of dollars. They do not automatically remove a person's right to marry, especially since the mental capacity to marry is low.

I finished my time in the USA both impressed by the amount of work that some lawyers and other legal professionals are doing on predatory marriage, and extremely frustrated by the lack of safeguarding at the time of the wedding itself. Rather than trying to sort it all out afterwards by complicated and extremely costly legal cases, it would be much better to put effort in at federal level (rather than a piecemeal state-by-state approach) to bring in safeguarding procedures to stop predatory marriages happening in the first place.

THE NETHERLANDS

When I started doing some preliminary research about marriage in the Netherlands, I found there was going to be an international conference there in the summer: the 8th World Congress on Adult Capacity (WCAC), from 8 – 10 July 2026. Even better for me, the entire conference was to be in English. This seemed to me to be a brilliant opportunity both to learn from experts and to raise awareness about predatory marriage and the lack of clarity about capacity to marry.

https://assets-eu-01.kc-usercontent.com/ff31ad68-341e-015e-fb52-24df7a00ecea/21058731-c59b-4201-a49a-67be8fcdc2cf/WCAC2026_congress-information-booklet.pdf

I sent in an abstract and was delighted when it was accepted. I planned my Churchill Fellowship research around the dates of the conference.

I was surprised when I looked at the programme, which of course was all about adult capacity, to find that mine appeared to be the only presentation with “marriage” in the title, though actually several presenters in the same session as I was referred to predatory marriage in their presentations, connecting my talk with theirs.



The Law and the Safeguarding at Marriage

I began to research the laws and procedures on marriage in the Netherlands.

The law on marriage and wills in the Netherlands is very different from in the UK.

In the Netherlands, marriage does not revoke an existing will, and never has done. It does not ever seem to have been a topic for significant legal debate: it is just generally accepted that this is what happens. However, Dutch courts have considered whether a will should be interpreted as valid if the testator’s personal circumstances changed after making it – such as by marrying or having children.

Dutch succession law does provide statutory protection for surviving spouses and children, however. If somebody dies without a will, the surviving spouse receives all the assets of the estate,

and the children receive a money claim payable after the spouse dies – their “legitimate portion” (legitieme portie).

https://lawandmore.eu/inheritance-law-netherlands/

In the Netherlands, it is not possible to disinherit your children completely in favour of a new partner.

Forced Marriage

As in the UK, forced marriage is a criminal offence. In the Netherlands it is punishable by up to two years in prison (in the UK it is up to seven years). Using someone’s lack of capacity to marry to bring this about is (again, as in the UK) also included in forced marriage.

However, it proved almost impossible to find out how many prosecutions there have been as they are not published systematically and also not counted as a distinct offence by the Dutch Public Prosecution Service. Also, although lack of capacity to marry is theoretically included in forced marriage, as in the UK, it is hardly mentioned in most documents – again, as in the UK - which tend to concentrate on people with full capacity who have been pressured into marriage.

Here’s the relevant paragraph from Dutch civil law:

(No marriage can be contracted if): *the free consent of one of the prospective spouses is missing or the mental capacity of one of them is so disturbed that he is unable to determine his own will or the understand the significance of his declarations;*

http://www.dutchcivillaw.com/actconflictlawmarriage.htm

Finding the detail of what this assessment of capacity entails, however, is almost impossible. As in the UK, legal and medical professionals acknowledge that it is near-impossible for officiants to evaluate mental capacity or recognise undue influence or coercive control in a short meeting. That, however, is the current procedure. Nobody to whom I spoke in the Netherlands could give me any further information on this and internet searches kept referring me back to our own website in the UK!

In the Netherlands, civil marriage is the only legal form of marriage.

Legally binding marriage officiants are known as Buitengewoon Ambtenaar van de Burgerlijke Stand, which is commonly abbreviated to BABS. Marriages usually take place at either the town hall or another approved municipal location, which might be a historic building.

As in the UK, both partners must be at least 18 years old and not already married or in a registered partnership. They are, in theory at least, trained to be alert to signs of coercion or pressure and also lack of understanding of to what the person is agreeing. All the official information that I could find (with some assistance from my Dutch-speaking brother, who lives in Amsterdam) insisted that free consent to marriage is taken seriously and if they have any suspicions that one party is not giving free consent (either by coercion or by lack of capacity) then they should pause or postpone the ceremony.

One of the warning signs they should look for is a significant age gap between the couple.

All this sounds fine but a bit of closer investigation demonstrates that it is not, perhaps, as clear or as thorough as it sounds.

The training they have is in short practical and legal training courses, such as this one:

https://kennisinstituutgemeenten.nl/trainingen/buitengewoon-ambtenaar-van-de-burgerlijke-stand-babs-trouwambtenaar/

Determining the will of both parties to a marriage or registered partnership is an essential task, in which increasing responsibility rests with the BABS since the introduction of the notification of intended marriage.

It is a one-day face-to-face course, or some e-learning and then a follow-up day, or standalone e-learning. It covers core legal subjects, though it not a full legal qualification.

The subjects covered are: how to determine valid legal consent (wilsbepaling) of both parties: rules surrounding marriage vs. registered partnerships: statutory requirements for witnesses, names and age criteria: handling special or complex situations, for example weddings by proxy.

It's good that there is training, of course, though I do not see how they can possibly cover all this in any meaningful way in a one-day course.

As in the USA, there is also a system where you can ask a relative or friend to conduct your wedding: a one-day BABS. In Amsterdam, for example, the relative or friend must apply to the City no later than four months before the date of the ceremony. You need a certificate of good conduct from the municipality where you live, plus a copy of both sides of a valid passport or a valid ID card. You need to be sworn in. I cannot find any mention of training for this role, though.

Interestingly, prior to 1935 couples had to announce their intention to marry orally and in writing. The oral announcement was abolished first and then the written announcement was abolished in 1987. In September 2015, the traditional marriage declarations were replaced by a private notification made directly to the municipality. Notification of marriage is no longer published publicly: hence there is more responsibility for the BABS (officiant), as mentioned in my quotation from the training, above.

This is safeguarding made worse, not better, and exactly the opposite of what I am aiming for in the UK, which is an easily-searchable database of notifications to marry. There would need to be some exceptions to this on safety grounds, because, for example, of vindictive ex-partners, and it would need to be carefully thought through – but it is there in the proposals from the recent Weddings Consultation in the UK.

https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/tying-the-knot-reforming-weddings-law-in-england-and-wales

On a blisteringly hot summer day I had a long conversation in a cafe with a legally binding wedding officiant (a BABS) who had kindly travelled into Amsterdam especially to meet me. I was, and am, extremely grateful to her, but I do not feel that I can name her here as really she's a whistle-blower and I know whistle-blowers can endure serious consequences.

She was very interested in learning from me about the what I had learned about safeguarding at marriage in the UK, because she was very concerned about the lack of safeguarding at marriage in the Netherlands.

She said that officiants keep trying to raise the topic, but "nobody is listening to us". She was aware that they are not supposed to continue with a wedding if one party lacks capacity to marry but she was also aware that BABS are very ill-equipped to identify it.

As in the UK, those who deal with the documents surrounding marriage in the Netherlands do very diligent checking – here is just one example that I found of a young couple who were sent away from notification of marriage because the man only had a digital copy of his translated birth certificate and it needed one with a "wet signature" – he was extremely angry about it, which probably did not help matters!

"It didn't say that, we were just supposed to know".

I did have sympathy for them because so much at marriage seems to work on this principle! You are not told but you are just supposed to know.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VU_0jyyfyFI&t=41s

There is very careful checking of documents – and yet no proper means of assessing mental capacity to marry. There is a huge gap in the procedures here. Of course, the Netherlands is not unique in this.

There are no separate statistics kept about predatory marriage in the Netherlands (as also applies in the UK) so it's very difficult to tell how many cases there are. However, when I was at the 8th World Congress on Adult Capacity in Amsterdam I asked about it repeatedly and although the delegates seemed very interested in my presentation, I did not find Dutch people who had come across it as an issue.

Where predatory marriage does not serve their wishes, though, predators will always turn to something else. There is a growing awareness of abuse of Power of Attorney in the UK and the same seems to be the case in the Netherlands. Here is a link to a 2021 article by Rieneke Stelma-Roorda, who was one of the organisers of the Amsterdam conference this year, about the abuse of Power of Attorney.

https://academic.oup.com/lawfam/article/35/1/ebab022/6330811

Here is just one quotation from it:

People with dementia or a reduced cognitive function are considered a group particular at risk of abuse.14 Manthorpe et al note that individuals in these groups become increasingly less able to protect themselves, have declining abilities to identify and manage risks, and may not report concerns or are not taken seriously when doing so.15

The conference I attended in the Netherlands was three days of fascinating presentations from all over the world. My talk was very well-received and many people came up to speak to me afterwards about their own experiences, or the situation in their country. Although I heard no

criticism of systems where marriage does not revoke a will, everyone to whom I spoke was in agreement that safeguarding at marriage very much needs to be improved.

CRIMINALITY

In today's world predators are looking for a loophole and they not only have several but the laws have enabled predators an easy route with no consequences
- Jill Langley, whose father suffered a predatory marriage

https://www.leedsday.co.uk/news/langley-v-qin-wills-and-marriage

No one shall profit from his or her own wrongdoing is a foundational legal rule. In Latin it is *Nullus commodum capere potest de injuria sua propria* – or no man can take advantage of his own wrong.

"Predatory marriage" is not actually a crime in itself: it is a kind of afterthought in the Forced Marriage legislation. Though I would argue (as would the relatives of other cases) that the predators are most certainly criminals.

If you find an old person who lacks mental capacity and groom them and marry them in secret and then inherit several hundred thousand pounds of money that was intended to go to family, or to friends, or to a charity, then that is a crime, surely?

The predators throw up a huge smokescreen before the older person dies, and they are very convincing with it. They have a range of statements which work really well for them.

I'm his/her carer/I'm the only one who cares for him/her/ The family simply don't care/The family are very selfish/The family are only after the money

Many of them alter the victim's prescribed medication, giving them the wrong amounts or omitting it altogether, but this somehow gets lost in the confusion. They transfer money to themselves whilst the victim is still alive and somehow it is never reclaimed. The man who married my mother used her debit card in the supermarket when she was not even with him, and was challenged about it by one of the staff. He explained that the card-owner was very old, and he was her carer. "Ahhh, how lovely", the staff said member said. She did not suggest that the man was committing fraud, which would have been a valid point. How do I know this little anecdote? The man who married my mother told me, with much enjoyment.

Sometimes the predator manages to obtain Power of Attorney for finance and property. I have heard of cases where the son or daughter has had Power of Attorney and has suddenly found that they no longer have it: it has now been acquired by the predator. Predators do not seem to have too much difficulty obtaining it. The abuse of Power of Attorney is a whole separate issue beyond the scope of this report, but once the predator has Power of Attorney, much of the estate just can seem to disappear, often overseas: China or the Philippines are two destinations that have been mentioned to me. I have heard of this both in the UK and in Canada. There are certainly links between the abuse of Power of Attorney and predatory marriage and I must also mention here that much abuse of Power of Attorney seems to spring from sons and daughters as well as other predators.

This is one reason why stopping marriage from revoking a will does not stop the problem entirely. "These abusers are very sophisticated," commented lawyer Bryan Gilmartin from WEL Partners in Canada.

When the victim dies, and the predator suddenly inherits a lot of money, the predator's public attitude is along the lines of "Ah well, that's happened now, I didn't ever intend it to, I never thought about the money, but I deserve it because I looked after the elderly person and their family didn't care about them."

If, of course, they really cared about the victim, they would take on board the victim's wishes, refund the money and return to the terms of the original will, where there was one. Strangely, in all the bluster the predators make about how much the predators love the victims, I have never found a case where this has happened.

It all gets them a very long way and is a big diversion from the fact that a crime has been committed here: a crime involving a lot of money, and a lot of control. It is, perhaps, easier, because in today's society we really don't seem to care about the elderly. I know that's a generalisation, and that many people do care, but the elderly are often viewed as a bit of burden and a hindrance. "Bed-blockers" in hospitals and "Boomers" (the generation born in the "baby boom" after the Second World War, sometimes described as old and bigoted people who have "had it easy") are the kind of pejorative terms that is applied to them.

So it is a crime, but what crime is it? Forced marriage? Fraud? Theft? Coercive control? Others that have been suggested to me recently are human trafficking and cuckooing. Which crime, or crimes, apply here?

Forced Marriage is the one the police used to try to prosecute our predator.

Here's the relevant part of the legislation: (Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014):

(2) In relation to a victim who lacks capacity to consent to marriage, the offence under subsection (1) is capable of being committed by any conduct carried out for the purpose of causing the victim to enter into a marriage (whether or not the conduct amounts to violence, threats or any other form coercion).

So there it is, a criminal offence, punishable by up to seven years in prison. The way that the police put it to us, it is a criminal offence if one party to the marriage lacks capacity to marry, and the other one marries them whilst knowing it.

This could be why the man who married my mother has, strangely, always denied that she had dementia at all, though almost everyone else was able to tell within a few minutes of meeting her.

However, how many criminal prosecutions have there been for forced marriage with dementia? None. I have not been able to find any.

A key reason for this, I suggest, is that there is no evidence kept at marriage: no audio or video recordings. It is, the Crown Prosecution Service told us, impossible to prove what actually happened on the day. The reasoning seemed to be that because, under the 2005 Mental Capacity Act, decisions are time-specific and decision-specific, what if my mother made a miraculous, temporary recovery from her five years of dementia? What if this temporary recovery just happened to coincide exactly with the day of notification of the marriage, and what if she then made another temporary recovery on the day she got married? We know from a letter written by the registrars that she could not answer some of the questions, but apparently this was not enough evidence for the Crown Prosecution Service to prosecute.

So, could such a marriage be classed as fraud or as theft?

Well, until it is proved that the marriage should not have taken place, then you cannot prosecute the predator for either of these. Unfortunately, then we come back to the same thing as in Forced Marriage – where it the evidence? It cannot be proved that the marriage was fraudulent, and without that, it cannot be proved that any theft has taken place.

I have heard, from a reputable Police source, "Never say fraud, say theft!" Whenever "fraud" is mentioned, I have heard from other victims that Police tend to tell people to report the incident to Report Fraud (formerly known as Action Fraud), which is the UK's national fraud and cybercrime reporting centre. https://www.reportfraud.police.uk/. Apparently they then pass it on to the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau. They are then triaged by "experienced crime reviewers" to determine which meet the "viability test" to make sure that there are definite lines of enquiry that can be pursued. Those that meet this test are referred to the appropriate police force for action.

I am almost certain that, in the case of a predatory marriage, all this would result in no further action, partly because of lack of knowledge about it. At some point the phrase "two sides to every story" would pop up, and then "there's no evidence kept at marriage", possibly with a hidden side-order of a culture of "oh well, it's just old people."

How about coercive control? This criminal offence (Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015) https://www.cps.gov.uk/prosecution-guidance/controlling-or-coercive-behaviour-intimate-or-family-relationship was never considered for my mother's predator. Although the many families to whom I have spoken all consider the predator's actions to be coercive control, it is incredibly hard to prove. Yes, the predators isolate the victims and control their finances and can be very frightening but, when the victim has dementia, it is almost impossible to know, or to prove, what has actually gone on.

What about "undue influence"? In the case of Jill Langley, she took her family's predator to court in a civil case and the predator was indeed found guilty of "undue influence". What happened to the predator? Here is an article by solicitor Ann Stanyer, who was one of the first people to become involved in the issue of predatory marriage in the UK:

https://wedlakebell.com/insights/newsletter/in-trust/for-better-for-worse-a-cautionary-tale-after-langley-v-qin/

This case was about Robert Harrington, who was 93 when he was married to Guixang Qin, who was 54 at the time. His daughter, Jill Langley, brought court proceedings against Guixang Qin. She won, and those of us who have been campaigning against predatory marriage were very pleased. However, as the article says:

The court set aside the Will made after the predatory marriage but, by law, all earlier Wills made by Mr Harrington were automatically revoked by the predatory marriage and could not be revived. As a consequence, Mr Harrington died intestate. This meant that Ms Qin still stood to inherit under the laws of intestacy, as the surviving spouse, the fixed net sum of £270,000 and half of the residue of the estate. Jill Langley, as the surviving child, inherited the other half of the residuary estate. The Court had no power to set aside the predatory marriage now that Mr Harrington had died.

My first thought was that there should have been criminal proceedings, brought by the Crown Prosecution Service, but so far there have not been. Why did the daughter, Jill, have to bring a civil case, with all the accompanying costs and stress?

At present such marriages do not result in criminal cases. If victim's families seek justice, they have to pursue the predator via a civil case (funding it themselves, of course) and often lose. In California, apparently, they have some legislation which is part-civil and part-criminal and this could be useful here. The example that was given to me of how this works was "What if someone punches you in the face? There should be a criminal prosecution but you might want to pursue a civil case for compensation."

One suggestion that I have heard mentioned a good number of times is "unconscionability". This is a legal term and not a term that's in common vocabulary but basically it means that a contract, in this case of marriage, has been formed with an unfair process, such as unequal bargaining power. "Unconscionability" is used as a defence to prevent an unfair contract from being enforced. When a younger person marries an older person with dementia, it could indeed be argued that the contract is unfair – but again, I do not know how you would prove it with no evidence kept at marriage and a persuasive predator saying "I really love them and married them in order to look after them, not to take advantage of them. How can you possibly think that of me?"



Laura Tamblyn Watts, President and CEO of CanAge, Canada's national seniors' advocacy organisation, suggested to me that "human trafficking" would be an idea worth exploring – after all, the predator takes the victim to the register office without informed consent to the marriage. I have not come across anyone in the UK who has suggested that but I think it's worth considering as a crime. Again, how would it be proved, though?

Martin Franssen from the Police in Canada commented that "cuckooing" could be a possible crime, and this was also suggested to me recently at one of my talks in the UK.

"Cuckooing" is a term first coined in the early 1990s by researcher Michael E. Buerger, though it has not become widely known until the last fifteen years or so.

The term is, of course, derived from the cuckoo, a bird which lays its eggs in other species' nests and takes over, ejecting the eggs or young. In criminal terms, it means when criminals take over the house of a vulnerable person and use it for illegal activities, often drugs, sex work or financial abuse. It is a criminal offence and can carry a prison sentence.

Would this work for someone who moves into the home of an elderly person and then financially abuses them by marriage? I think it could do – it's certainly worth considering as a possible extension of the current description of this crime. Consideration would be needed as to how it could be proved and I would hope that the proposal in the current Wills Bill to infer "undue influence" from a pattern of behaviour could be useful here. https://lawcom.gov.uk/project/wills/

All of these proposals, or others, would require much greater awareness of the "bigger picture" from all authorities. Of course, "innocent until proven guilty" is the maxim by which the law works, and quite rightly too. However, training and awareness for all – police, social workers, solicitors, NHS workers of all kinds, registrars, will-writers, everyone who works with the elderly -

is key. Everyone needs to know that such predators do exist, and that they are criminals, often making a huge amount of money from their crimes. Everyone needs to know that just because the predators send up big clouds of doubt and confusion about what has happened along the lines of "I am your elderly loved one's devoted carer/partner" that does not mean that they are telling the truth.

Perhaps with determined, persistent, imaginative think-outside-the-box detectives whose seniors are prepared to commit resources to the investigation, then the predator could be investigated further. At the moment, however, because of a variety of reasons of which underfunding, time pressure on police, plausible predators and a culture of – sadly – "old people don't matter as much as younger ones", some police (and I emphasise not all police!) take the approach that this is "simply too difficult to prove". Other police just look at the surface of what is happening. One victim's relatives had really serious concerns about her father and was fobbed off with "Your father's living in a lovely home". Yes, well my mother was living in a lovely home too, until the predator filled the whole of the upstairs with jackets. Nobody from the authorities – social services, police - looked upstairs whilst my mother was alive, but if they had done, they would have seen that my mother's bedroom, which had been a very tidy room full of pictures and ornaments, now looked like this:



We had asked social services to please look upstairs. They did visit the house at our request, but I think the man just charmed them away and they did not look upstairs, so they never saw this room. "Nothing to worry about, no safeguarding concerns" they said when they rang me later. My mother was clean, she was well-fed and they made a note of this. I can see they were thinking that they had far worse cases to deal with. Why didn't I push harder and ask them to go back, visit again, look upstairs? I was, by then, feeling absolutely crushed and simply unable to do that.

The Police asked the man about the jackets, after my mother's death. The man pointed out to them, correctly, that owning a lot of jackets is not a crime. By then it was too late for it to have any real significance.

At the moment, as previously mentioned, court cases tend to be left to the families, who have to bring a civil case if they want justice. These are usually incredibly costly and way beyond the reach of most families. Usually they do not succeed, for a variety of reasons including the fact that the predators are very plausible and, as the relatives of many victims have said to me, "Once you're married, the law protects the predator."

Theoretically, as I quoted at the beginning of this section, under the law "No man can take advantage of his own wrongdoing" and yet, in predatory marriages that is exactly what is happening.

We need people to think differently. We need more “professional curiosity”. We need ways to prosecute predators: ways that will work, evidence to be kept at marriage, prosecutions that can succeed, because these predators are criminals.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

With appropriate legal changes and proper safeguarding at marriage, almost all predators would be stopped before weddings took place. There would probably be a few cases that might slip through, but if the predators were then prosecuted, I suspect that people would then stop seeing predatory marriage as an easy way to make a large amount of money in a comparatively short time.

I have had quite a few possible solutions suggested over the past ten years. Sadly, some, which initially sound like a good idea, lose credibility once considered in detail.

One that keeps cropping up is:

“Everyone over a certain age should have a capacity test before marriage.”

This sounds at first thought like something that might work, but I really don’t think so. What age would that be, then? Sixty? Seventy? Eighty? Ninety? Some people have dementia at a much younger age than any of these and a few people still have all their faculties at over ninety. I think the idea of such a test would be cumbersome, costly, offensive to many and really against people’s civil liberties.

Again, one that has been suggested to me a few times, both in the UK and in Canada, is:

“Perhaps, when there is a big age gap between the couple, both parties should have a capacity test before marriage.” Again, something that sounds as though it might be useful, but again, does not bear closer examination. What should the age gap be? Ten years? Twenty years? Thirty years? Again, it would be cumbersome, intrusive and an affront to civil liberties.

One suggestions that sounds really good until you start thinking about how it might work in practice, is this one, which was suggested a few years ago:

Since marriage revokes a will, what if someone has the lower level of capacity to marry but not the higher level of capacity needed to make a will? Perhaps then they could be allowed to marry, but legislation could be brought in so that, if you have capacity to marry but not the higher level of capacity needed to make a will, then the marriage would not revoke your will because you do not have capacity to make a new one.

However, this assessment that someone has capacity to marry but not to make a will would be impossible to do, since nowhere is there written down what you have to be able to say, do or understand in order to marry. Also, at present no audio or video evidence is kept at marriage. It is, perhaps, a good solution intellectually but it would never work in practice.

The key solutions that I would suggest are:

a) a change in the law so that marriage would no longer revoke a previous will

b) “Undue influence” needs to be made easier to prove. This is discussed in the Wills Bill, 2025. If it were possible to infer undue influence from a pattern of behaviour, then that would really help.

c) improved safeguarding at marriage. Robust procedures with consequences if these are not followed.

d) better training for registrars and for their role to be professionalised nationally.
If, as a nation, we are to take marriage seriously, then we need well-trained registrars who understand about safeguarding and mental capacity, even if the final decision on capacity to marry is not made by them.

To elaborate on the topic of training for registrars:
At the moment there seems to be a movement towards giving registrars more responsibility but I'm not sure whether it is planned to accompany this with better pay!

It is planned that the system at civil marriage will change from a buildings-based system to an officiant-based system. This means that it is the registrar who will be licensed rather than the building: the idea of this is that it would give couples more choice as to where they will marry. Another suggestion is that there should just be one registrar, rather than the current two, at a wedding. Registrars I have met recently think that this is going ahead and it, rightly, makes them nervous.

When a patient is being given chemotherapy, there is a requirement to have two nurses present, because it is safer that way: one nurse is there to act as a barrier in case the first one makes a mistake (and it is a fact universally acknowledged that everyone makes mistakes!) There should be two registrars at a wedding for safeguarding reasons.

At the moment registrars have very little time to decide whether a wedding should go ahead or whether they need to stop it. When people do not have enough time to make a considered decision, their brain goes to the "mental shortcuts" of biases and stereotypes. I suspect that my mother and her predator were stereotyped as "sweet old couple".

Registrars also need to be trained in EDI – equality, diversity and inclusion. I have heard from many people from ethnic minorities that they tend to get more thorough questioning from registrars. I suspect that this will be for a variety of reasons, but some of them will undoubtedly be brain shortcuts and the fact that registrars are aware of sham marriages for immigration purposes.

Having said all that, I do think that the final decision, if it is suspected that someone lacks capacity to marry, should not be made by registrars unless they have a lot more training, and a corresponding rise in pay to accompany it. There is an assumption made by the public (which has been said to me many times) that registrars already have training in assessing mental capacity that is on a par with that of doctors or solicitors and it is simply not the case. What I would suggest is needed is a set of robust questions, with the idea that if one of the couple cannot answer correctly, then the wedding must be paused for a medical capacity assessment. There should be clear procedures and consequences if this is not done. One consequence could be, for example, that the marriage is not valid. Registrars would also need some practical training in what to say in order to stop a wedding to make sure that it is clear, understandable and not open to arguments from the wedding party.

Registrars also need to feel supported by the General Register Office (or whichever department is overseeing their training after the planned wedding reforms take effect). At the moment they do not always feel that they will receive back-up in whatever decision they make and it is much easier for them to just hope for the best and continue with the wedding.

To continue with my suggested proposals for reform:

e) training in dementia and how dementia may present for professionals of all kinds.

f) a definition of what exactly is meant by “capacity to marry” and how it would be demonstrated at the wedding ceremony. What do you have to be able to understand, or to say, or to do? Legal and safeguarding professionals should be brought together to come up with a clear definition, which should then be implemented nationally.

g) Evidence should be kept at marriage – a video-recording (preferably) or at least an audio-recording of the ceremony. This would protect both the couple and the people conducting the ceremony and also enable prosecutions for predators. If you call your bank you get the message “Your call may be recorded - -” - surely, getting married is at least as important?

h) Everyone should be encouraged to make a will. Most people do not like to think about their own death, but it is incredibly important that they do think about it.

Here is some sound advice from Martin Lewis who has repeatedly called will writing “one of the most important financial tasks UK adults ignore”. https://www.makemywill.net/blog/martin-lewis-will-writing

I should like to give more talks, both face to face and online, to raise awareness of all the issues around predatory marriage.

On October 24th, 2026, I was invited to speak at an event for the WillPower Alliance, which was a collaboration with the BBC, masterminded by journalist and producer Sue Mitchell and also Matt Breakwell. They are planning to gather data to further reform.
https://www.willpoweralliance.co.uk/

One phrase that I have heard recently, at the Will Power event and elsewhere, is “It should never be easier to perpetrate than to prosecute”.

At the moment it is far, far easier to perpetrate than to prosecute. This needs to change.

What can people do at the moment to protect their loved ones?

I have seen very many articles in the media and some from solicitors which end, in the absence of proper solutions, with the rather simplistic “you should keep a close eye on your elderly loved ones.”

I lived next door and saw my mother several times a day. Realistically, I would say that very few people can keep a closer eye on their parents than I did. I say “realistically” because the only closer version is living in the same house as they do – and, in fact, that is what my husband and I do now – we live with our son, his wife and their two lovely little daughters.

That is not a valid solution for everyone of course, and in today’s society many people live hundreds of miles away from their parents.

What else can worried families to do at the moment to prevent predatory marriage? A "caveat in expectation of marriage" is one method. You must enter the caveat via the Superintendent Registrar at the local register office where you expect the notice to marry to be given. Here's a helpful article with details of what you need to do:
https://anthonygold.co.uk/insight/marriage-caveats-what-can-i-do-to-stop-a-predatory-marriage/

It must be about a marriage to a particular person – you can't just enter a general caveat along the lines of "my parent does not have capacity to marry".

At the time my mother married, the system of caveats only applied locally, so it was reasonably easy for a determined predator to work round it. Now, I understand that it has finally become a national system.

Of course, you would only know to do that if you knew this caveat system existed – we knew nothing about it. It is not foolproof but it does at least alert the registrars to the fact that someone thinks this person does not have capacity to marry. It is also free, unlike just about anything else that worried relatives might try.

A Statutory Will also keeps being mentioned to me. This is a will authorised by the Court of Protection under the Mental Capacity Act 2005 for someone who, for example, had married but lacked mental capacity to make a new will.

https://www.premiersolicitors.co.uk/blog/what-is-a-statutory-will

This is a good idea in theory but tricky in practice as a preventative measure for predatory marriage. For one thing, you have to actually know that someone has married your loved one, and that their previous will has been revoked by the marriage. If they did not have a will in the first place, you would need to know about the marriage in order to apply for a statutory will. Many predators keep the marriage secret, of course.

A statutory will is expensive. How much does it cost? From several thousand pounds upwards (with an emphasis on "upwards"!), depending upon the complexity of the case and whether there is a dispute.

Another process that has been used occasionally is a Forced Marriage Protection Order. In 2021 there was a Court of Protection case, (known in legal language as Re BU, meaning "about BU"), where the daughter of a 70-year-old with vascular dementia was concerned that her mother's partner was exercising coercive control over her mother in order to gain access to her million pound estate.

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/forced-marriage-protection-orders-fl701/forced-marriage-protection-orders

The partner had a long history of criminal behaviour, the judge found that BU lacked mental capacity to make decisions regarding contact with the partner, and the order was granted by the judge, Mrs Justice Roberts.

Many people, though, have no idea that such an order exists – and, of course, we, like many relatives of other cases, had no idea that the man was planning to marry my mother.

How much does this cost? There is no court application fee but I suspect you would end up paying other fees, such as for a solicitor. It would, like all legal proceedings, be very stressful, with no guarantee of success.

CONCLUSION

The research that I have done is only skimming the surface of predatory marriage globally. It would be good to know more about what happens in many other countries and more research would be very helpful.

However, I am certain that we should not "let perfect be the enemy of good" here. A start has been made to improve the law and the procedures at marriage and we should build on that. The HMG Forced Marriage Unit has begun rolling out quarterly training about procedures and safeguarding at marriage to registrars, social workers and police. https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/o/hmg-forced-marriage-unit-33095672291

This is a very good start but I would argue that it's not enough: more practical, face-to-face training is needed, and more emphasis on predatory marriage than is currently included.

The UK has the chance to become a world leader in marriage laws and procedures and we need to work from this standpoint. We need to abandon and ignore judges' knowledge, opinions and comments about dementia from the nineteeth century – they are neither relevant nor accurate and endless rehashing of them in court cases is pointless.

I have given over 350 talks about this topic now and I learn something useful at every one of them. Recently I gave a talk to the National Independent Safeguarding Conference 2026 for Wales. Rhian Bowen-Davies, who is the Older People's Commissioner for Wales, said something that I think it really important and it is this:

"The right to be safe does not diminish with age."

I want to end by bringing Joan Blass, my mother, to life again, with a sonnet she wrote in the 1970s. To me it demonstrates both her love of literature and her love of her garden: both essential parts of her personality, along with her love of parties, dancing and her ability to build a rapport with small children. I miss her so much.

JUST AFTER NOON

SONNET – On Sitting in a Suburban Garden

A blackbird dominates the decibels
Of spring-demented birds. My body's heat
Is matched by May-time sun: no frost repels.
A thrush hikes through dead leaves with crunching feet.
A rime of blossom rounds the tall pear tree
Sparkling against a sudden blue which vies
With new-popped vinca. A bloated bumble bee
Explores forget-me-nots. The rabbit tries
A coltsfoot, apologetically culled.
To beat the city dust, the warming earth
Exudes delicious scents, like wine just mulled.
Intoxicating rapture! World's new birth!
Oh, let me not look down and see the weeds
And all the back-break slog the garden needs!

Joan Blass

Thanks

With very grateful thanks to:

The Churchill Fellowship for funding and support

Everyone who has invited me to give a talk on the topic of Predatory Marriage
Everyone else who has helped in any way – there are far too many people to list them all.
All the relatives of victims of predatory marriage who have spoken to me

My family: Stephen Franks, Olli, Alex, Linnet and Eider Franks
Ian McKillop for photographs

Professor Albert Oosterhoff, Whaley Estate Litigation, Toronto
Andrew Bishop, Partner, Rothley Law, whose support has been invaluable throughout
Anne de Boer, Alzheimer Nederland
Beth Chappell, St Gemma's Hospice, Leeds
Bryan Gilmartin, Co-Managing Partner, WEL Partners, Toronto
Caiomhe Turner, Senior Associate, Rothley Law
Deborah Abrahams, Communications Consultant, Amsterdam and my sister-in-law
Eric Hoffstein, Litigator at Fogler, Rubinoff LLP, Toronto
Esther Kuijpers, Netherlands
Fabian Hamilton MP, Labour, Leeds North-East and his team especially Tom Hinchcliffe
Greg Blue, Senior Staff Lawyer, British Columbia Law Institute
Heather Galvin, Probate Judge, South Carolina Judicial Branch
Holly Chantler, Department Head, Partner, Morr and Co LLP
Jaclyn Holdsworth, Articling Student, WEL Partners, Toronto
Jill Langley, daughter of a victim of predatory marriage
John Poyser, partner, Tradition Law LLP Estates and Trusts, Winnipeg
Julian Zebot, Partner, Maslon LLP, Minneapolis
Justine Schneider, Professor Emerita, University of Nottingham
Kathleen Cunningham, former Executive Director, British Columbia Law Institute and the Canadian Centre for Elder Law
Kees Blankman, Endowed Professor, Amsterdam Centre for Family Law
Kevin Zakreski, Senior Staff Lawyer, British Columbia Law Institute
Kimberly Whaley and her whole team at WEL Partners, Toronto
Laura Tamblyn Watts, President and CEO, CanAge
Mark J. Esposito, senior lawyer, Shatz, Schwartz and Fentin
Mark McCabe, Vulnerable Persons Co-ordinator, Toronto Police Service
Martin Franssen, Older Adult Support and Investigative Service Detective for the Durham region (now retired)
Mary Glindon MP, Labour, Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend and her team
Matt Breakwell, WillPower Alliance
Michael Blass, translator Dutch to English, and my brother
Nicky Gilmour, nurse, campaigner and daughter of a victim of predatory marriage
Pamela Teaster, Director of the Virginia Tech Center for Gerontology
Rachael Clawson, Associate Professor, Director of the Centre for Social Work, University of Nottingham

Rieneke Stelma-Roorda, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Law, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
Robin Jacoby, Emeritus Professor of old age psychiatry, Linacre College, Oxford University
Rosie Harding, Professor, Birmingham Law School
Sandra Glazier, Estate and Family Law Attorney, Michigan
Sarah Prentice, Solicitor, Scottish Social Services Counsel
Sarah Young, Director, Solicitor, of Ridley and Hall who has supported me from the start
Stephen Lawson, solicitor, co-chair of the Law Society's Private Client and Estates Committee
Sue Mitchell, BBC journalist and producer