



global witness

For immediate release: 13 July

Coalition's promises on libel reform are welcome – but must be implemented urgently

Global Witness today welcomed the UK coalition government's decision to review England's defamation laws. Justice Minister Lord McNally announced on Friday plans to publish a draft defamation bill that will be put out for consultation and pre-legislative scrutiny in the New Year. He recognised the "detrimental effects" that the current system has on freedom of speech and the public interest, and gave a "firm commitment" to prioritise reform by end of the 2011/12 parliamentary session.

The government's move follows Lib Dem Peer Lord Lester's May defamation bill and months of pressure from the Libel Reform Campaign, a civil society coalition which has highlighted the negative impact of England's claimant-friendly libel laws on organisations investigating and campaigning on matters in the public interest. The call for reform has also been made by lawyers, journalists and academics.

Charmian Gooch, Director of Global Witness said: "It is absolutely critical to our work exposing the links between natural resources, conflict and corruption that we are able to publish our findings without fear of a ruinous libel suit. Our detailed and responsible reports are clearly in the public interest. Yet they are currently high risk because of the outdated and farcical imbalance in our laws."

Among the reforms Global Witness wants to see the government implement are:

- a statutory defence strengthening public interest and freedom of expression
- action to counter the rising trend of "libel tourism" which encourages foreign claimants to use Britain's courts to do their legal dirty work.
- a single publication rule to prevent libel claimants bringing a case each time a story is downloaded or reprinted
- extension of qualified privilege to a wider range of national and international public documents

"The balance between defending private interests and freedom of speech has been out of kilter for far too long. We look to the new government to inject fairness and common sense into English libel and privacy laws. They have set off on the right foot: we hope to see a detailed timetable for the implementation of wider ranging reforms as soon as possible."

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The [Libel Reform Campaign](#) is a coalition of NGOs, led by Index on Censorship, Sense About Science and English Pen, which are at the forefront of the growing movement for libel reform