



global witness

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## **Libel reform movement gathers steam as Straw cracks down on 'no-win, no-fee' suits**

Global Witness welcomes [Jack Straw's long-overdue decision](#) to slash the fees charged by libel lawyers working on a 'no-win, no-fee' basis. A landmark victory for freedom of speech in the UK, the crackdown also reflects the growing momentum behind the campaign for change to English defamation law led by [Index on Censorship](#), [PEN](#) and [Sense About Science](#).

The increasing use of 'Conditional Fee Agreements' by libel lawyers has [directly affected the ability](#) of investigative campaign organisations to expose corruption and exploitation. Under these arrangements, an unsuccessful defendant would have to pay the lawyer's normal costs plus a 'success fee' which could be as much as the full amount again (i.e. 100% more). Straw's announcement will limit the 'success fee' to 10% of normal costs when it comes into force. This is welcome because up until now the removal of financial risk for plaintiffs has encouraged speculative litigation, whilst the huge potential costs for defendants has led to pre-emptive censorship.

The net result has been a glut of business for predatory lawyers and an undermining of the public's right to know. This was finally recognised by yesterday announcement which reduces the risks for defendants and the incentive for plaintiffs.

"For too long, Britain's libel laws have served the interests of powerful people with plenty to hide, over those of the public," said Global Witness Director Charmian Gooch. "Libel lawyers have overplayed their hand: they will no longer be able to charge such bloated fees. This shows that the government is at last waking up to the need to redress the legal balance back in favour of freedom of speech."

Global Witness hopes that this key reform will herald further change when Mr Straw's recently convened Libel Advisory Group concludes its much-anticipated review of the UK's outdated libel and privacy laws in March.

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**Global Witness investigates and campaigns to prevent natural resource-related conflict and corruption and associated environmental and human rights abuses.**