

UNITED KINGDOM: PRESSURE ON BROWN TO DEFEND THREATENED RIGHTS

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Leading free speech NGOs have challenged the incoming Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, to put flesh on the bones of his commitment to open government.

In a statement released today, English PEN, Index on Censorship and ARTICLE 19 state that promises of 'a new kind of politics' in 1997 led to groundbreaking measures on Human Rights and Freedom of Information.

"Yet", they say, "the standards set out in these landmark acts have slipped through the fingers of successive Parliaments."

In order to avoid such failed commitments in future, they propose the following ten measures which Brown must take if his government is to mark a departure from his predecessor:

- **Safeguard Freedom of Information:** Proposals to limit the use of the Freedom of Information Act would severely weaken the ability of the media to hold the government to account and should be scrapped.
- **Defend Freedom of Expression:** The UN Human Rights Council is wavering in its defence of free speech. Britain should stand up for this key democratic right internationally and support the work of British NGOs in protecting freedom of expression.
- **Protect Whistleblowers:** The Official Secrets Act should not be used as a catch-all mechanism for the government to protect itself. It should be reformed by introducing a public interest defence for whistleblowers.
- **Respect the Right to Protest:** Public order legislation such as the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, the Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003, and the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005, has awarded broad powers to the police and banned all unauthorised demonstrations within 1 km of the Houses of Parliament. These measures should be amended to restore the age-old democratic right to protest.
- **Distinguish Words from Actions:** The offence of glorifying terrorism is drawn so broadly that it fails to distinguish speech acts which constitute incitement from those which merely describe terrorist actions. The offence must be abolished.
- **Decriminalise Defamation:** The antiquated offence of criminal defamation violates international standards of free expression. The United Kingdom must come into line with global efforts to remove this offence from the statute books.
- **Bury Dead Laws:** Old offences such as sedition and blasphemy may have fallen into disuse but their presence on the statute books still casts a long shadow in the UK and abroad. They are incompatible with basic democratic ideals and should be repealed.
- **Protect the Fourth Estate:** The media is facing growing restraints through the use of privacy law, reporting restrictions, libel law, court injunctions and contempt of court. The government should commission an independent inquiry into media freedom.
- **Guarantee Digital Democracy:** The impending digital switchover will result in the freeing up of considerable broadcast spectrum, which should not all be sold off to the highest bidder. The government must ensure that Ofcom reserves sufficient spectrum for citizen and community uses.

- **Cherish Charities:** The voluntary sector represents the public's desire for real social change. The government should support the sector's efforts to relax the restrictions on so-called 'political' campaigning. Charities should remain banned from supporting individual political parties, but they should be free to lobby governments for change.

Source: <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/press/uk-10-point-plan-statement.pdf>