



For immediate release – 21 May 2010

PRESS RELEASE

United Kingdom: Coalition Government Promises Major Reforms for Freedom of Expression and Information

The UK's new coalition government has published its "Programme for Government" plan, which includes commitments to a number of reforms that will impact on freedom of expression and freedom of information. ARTICLE 19 welcomes the plan and urges the government to live up to these commitments.

The Programme for Government seeks to reverse substantial erosion of civil liberties in the UK and roll back state intrusion. It includes a focus on "Freedom, Fairness Responsibility" and covers issues from banking to universities. There are a number of commitments on human rights, including on freedom of expression and freedom of information.

In terms of domestic policy, the new coalition has committed to reform libel laws. It has pledged to extend freedom of information, in relation to national and local public spending, and crime statistics, including hate crime. It has also pledged to enable the public to secure parliamentary debates and bills through large petitions.

In addition, the coalition has pledged to maintain the BBC's political independence, protect media diversity, and provide more support for whistleblowers.

Internationally, the coalition has pledged to stand firm on human rights, tackle corruption, and strengthen democratic values in all foreign policy. It has also pledged to review national security legislation.

ARTICLE 19 welcomes many of these proposals and will support and monitor their implementation. ARTICLE 19 is also calling on the coalition government to ensure that the commission established to "*investigate the creation of a British bill of rights that incorporates and builds on our obligations under the European Convention*" is not being used to undermine the Human Rights Act principles, and to limit the UK's international and European human rights obligations, but that, on the contrary, it re-enforces the UK's human rights commitments and responsibilities.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- For more information please contact: Oliver Spencer, oliver@article19.org +44 20 7324 2500
- The Programme for Government can be found at: programmeforgovernment.hmg.gov.uk/

- The sections of the Programme which may impact on freedom of expression are below:
 - Section 2, Business: We will ... investigate further ways of improving corporate accountability and transparency
 - Section 3, Civil Liberties: We will extend the scope of the Freedom of Information Act to provide greater transparency. We will restore rights to non-violent protest. We will review libel laws to protect freedom of speech. We will introduce safeguards against the misuse of anti-terrorism legislation. We will establish a Commission to investigate the creation of a British Bill of Rights
 - Section 4, Communities and Local Government: We will impose tougher rules to stop unfair competition by local authority newspapers. We will implement the Sustainable Communities Act, so that citizens know how taxpayers' money is spent in their area and have a greater say over how it is spent
 - Section 6, Crime and Policing: We will oblige the police to publish detailed local crime data statistics every month, so the public can get proper information about crime in their neighbourhoods and hold the police to account for their performance. We will require police forces to hold regular 'beat meetings' so that residents can hold them to account. We will promote better recording of hate crimes against disabled, homosexual and transgender people, which are frequently not centrally recorded.
 - Section 7, Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport: We will maintain the independence of the BBC, and give the National Audit Office full access to the BBC's accounts to ensure transparency. We will enable partnerships between local newspapers, radio and television stations to promote a strong and diverse local media industry.
 - Section 12, Equalities: We will use our relationships with other countries to push for unequivocal support for gay rights
 - Section 13, Europe: We will approach forthcoming legislation in the area of criminal justice on a case-by-case basis, with a view to maximising our country's security, protecting Britain's civil liberties and preserving the integrity of our criminal justice system
 - Section 15, Foreign Affairs: We will work to establish a new 'special relationship' with India and seek closer engagement with China, while standing firm on human rights in all our bilateral relationships. We want to strengthen the Commonwealth as a focus for promoting democratic values and development.
 - Section 16, Government Transparency: We will require public bodies to publish online the job titles of every member of staff and the salaries and expenses of senior officials. We will regulate lobbying through introducing a statutory register of lobbyists and ensuring greater transparency. We will introduce new protections for whistleblowers in the public sector. We will require full, online disclosure of all central government spending and contracts over £25,000. We will create a new 'right to data' so that government-held datasets can be requested and used by the public, and then published on a regular basis.
 - Section 18, International Development: We will use the aid budget to support the development of local democratic institutions, civil society groups, the media and enterprise; and support efforts to tackle corruption. We will introduce full transparency in aid and publish details of all UK aid spending online. We will push for similarly high levels of transparency internationally. We will explore ways of helping the very poorest developing countries to take part in international climate change negotiations. We will support reform

- of global financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in order to increase the involvement of developing nations.
- Section 21, National Security: We will urgently review Control Orders, as part of a wider review of counter-terrorist legislation, measures and programmes. We will seek to find a practical way to allow the use of intercept evidence in court
 - Section 24, Political Reform: We will ensure that any petition that secures 100,000 signatures will be eligible for formal debate in Parliament. The petition with the most signatures will enable members of the public to table a bill eligible to be voted on in Parliament. We will introduce a new ‘public reading stage’ for bills to give the public an opportunity to comment on proposed legislation online, and a dedicated ‘public reading day’ within a bill’s committee stage where those comments will be debated by the committee scrutinising the bill.
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.