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PRESS RELEASE

United Kingdom: Government Begins Decriminalisation of Defamation, Concerns Remain for Northern Ireland

ARTICLE 19, English PEN and Index on Censorship welcome the UK government's drive to decriminalise defamation. However, we are deeply concerned that the proposed amendments do not abolish the offence of 'blasphemous libel' in Northern Ireland.

Led by Secretary of State for Justice Jack Straw MP and Lord Bach, the newly released amendment to the Coroners and Justice Bill will repeal the criminal offences of sedition and seditious libel, defamatory libel, and obscene libel in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

ARTICLE 19, English Pen and Index on Censorship are campaigning for the decriminalisation of defamation and repeal of blasphemy offences in the UK and around the world and strongly welcome the amendments.

Evan Harris MP, an ARTICLE 19 Board Member, who has led the campaign for decriminalisation within the UK legislature, says: *"I welcome this repeal which I hope will show the way forward for many other jurisdictions which not only have these unjust and unjustifiable laws, but which actually use them to censor and persecute writers and journalists."*

However the three organisations remain deeply concerned that instead of repealing all criminal offences of libel, the offence of blasphemous libel in Northern Ireland remains.

The historical offence of blasphemous libel is entirely incompatible with democratic ideals. In the past it has been abused to protect religions, religious ideas and religious leaders from legitimate criticism.

"We call on Members of Parliament to introduce further amendments in advance of the 26 October debate on the Bill. They should not deny Northern Ireland full protection for freedom of expression. This ground breaking step will be tainted if such a derogation is permitted."

Lord Lester, Liberal Democrat Peer and Vice President of English PEN who will table the amendment in the House of Lords, comments: *"I welcome the amendments but I hope before the Lords debate, the Government will reconsider their decision to retain*

the offence of blasphemous libel in Northern Ireland. That would create an arbitrary and divisive outcome threatening free speech and freedom of religion. God no more needs to be protected by criminal law in Northern Ireland than in Great Britain.”

Criminal defamation has not been used in the UK for a number of years, but its “chilling effect” remains. Moreover, states around the world justify their persistent use of criminal defamation according to the example set by the UK.

In many countries, criminal defamation laws are abused by the powerful to limit criticism and to stifle public debate. The threat of harsh criminal sanctions, especially imprisonment, exerts a profound chilling effect on freedom of expression.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- For more information please contact: Oliver Spencer, ARTICLE 19 oliver@article19.org, +44 (0) 7837 833 893, Robert Sharp, English PEN, robert@englishpen.org, +44 (0) 020 7713 0023, Jo Glanville, Index on Censorship, jo@indexoncensorship.org, +44 (0) 20 7278 2313.
- 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. To see more details of defamation and its effects around the world, please see ARTICLE 19’s Global Maps at: www.article19.org/advocacy/defamationmap/map/?dataSet=defamation_legislation
- Index on Censorship is an organisation dedicated to protecting and promoting freedom of speech through its publications, international projects, events, campaigns and website