

Society of Editors

www.societyofeditors.org

From the Deputy Executive Director

Rt Hon Theresa May MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London
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28 April 2017

Dear Prime Minister

We are writing to you to seek confirmation of your party's ongoing commitment to promoting the value and importance of press freedom in the UK ahead of the upcoming General Election on 8 June 2017.

The Society of Editors represents more than 400 members in national, regional and local newspapers, magazines, broadcasting, digital media, media law and journalism education. Our members are as different as the publications, programmes and websites they create and the communities and audiences they serve but they share the values that matter: the universal right to freedom of expression; the importance of the vitality of the news media in a democratic society; the promotion of press and broadcasting freedom and the public's right to know and the commitment to high editorial standards.

On behalf of our members, we are deeply concerned that creeping legislation continues to pose a pernicious threat to press freedom in the UK. Ahead of World Press Freedom Day on 3 May 2017 we seek your assurance that the promotion and extension of media freedom in the UK will feature highly on your party's agenda during the election campaign and that your support for the public's right to know will be contained in your manifesto.

Section 40

The Society's members are concerned that freedom of expression in the UK is under a sustained attack on a number of fronts. While the Society welcomed the Secretary of State's review of the need for the commencement of Section 40 costs orders in 2016, we remain deeply opposed to the commencement of the legislation on the basis of the clear danger it poses to press freedom and the public's right to be informed. There has been an arduous 300-year battle to achieve a measure of press freedom and freedom of expression in the UK and the current threat of legislation to impinge upon the work of journalists in the UK is having a chilling effect on the country's reputation both at home and abroad.

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Opposition to Section 40 is not restricted to the UK. Editors and journalists in the Commonwealth and other parts of the world are concerned about the effects such controls will have on press freedom more widely. Britain is seen as the mother of democracy and a fierce defender of freedoms. A new package of press controls introduced by the UK government and parliament would be an open invitation to other less scrupulous regimes to follow our example. It is a basic principle of any democratic society that politicians should not impose restrictions upon journalists that would inhibit their ability to hold power to account - the correct way to protect victims of excessive press intrusion and other abuses is through the continued system of effective self-regulation.

World Press Freedom Index 2017

As you will no doubt be aware, the recent publication of Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index for 2017 saw the UK once again fall in the rankings to 40th out of 180 countries. In the past five years, an obsession with surveillance and attacks on the media by anti-establishment politicians has resulted in a declining state of press freedom which has seen the country slip 12 places in the Index. The UK, once considered a bastion of journalistic freedom and a benchmark by which other countries set standards in respect of the freedom of the press, is now considered on the international stage to be significantly less free than countries such as Ghana, South Africa and Chile. This is gravely concerning at a time when the UK should be taking an international lead in promoting the value and importance of press freedom and condemning appalling restrictions placed upon freedom of speech such as those currently being witnessed in Turkey.

At home, proposed legislation continues to be of a worrying concern. The widely publicised misuse of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act and misapplication of powers designed to combat terrorism and serious crime, have resulted in the extensive use of surveillance powers in the UK to curtail the freedom of the press and, by extension, the public's access to information. The passage of the Investigatory Powers Act in 2016, widely criticised for its failure to adequately safeguard journalistic material, has set a precedent by which legislation is frequently being used to tighten government control on the flow of information and, as such, the UK now boasts a law that is regarded as "the most extreme surveillance in the history of any western democracy". This is unacceptable in a democratic society.

Law Commission's Protection of Official Data

The increasing use of surveillance powers to restrict the freedom of the media continues to be under attack from Law Commission proposals to radically increase prison terms for revealing and handling state secrets. While the Society has welcomed your assurances that the freedom of investigative journalists and whistleblowers will not be restricted under the proposals, we remain of the view that it is essential that the government consult more widely on such recommendations. A free press is a fundamental aspect of any functioning democracy. The bedrock of a free press is the ability of journalists to do their work without the secret interference of the state. I urge you and your colleagues in the party to look again at this legislation and use your powers of scrutiny to ensure

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that the proposals are looked at again.

On behalf of the Society and our members, I would welcome your assurances that the points I have raised will be considered carefully and that you remain committed to the value of a free press and its fundamental role in any democratic society.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,



Ian Murray
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