

Dear Society of Media Lawyers,

My name is Peter Geoghegan. I am an author, journalist and editor of the award-winning newsletter Democracy for Sale. I am writing because I am preparing a piece for publication in Democracy for Sale and the New Statesman that concerns the Society of Media Lawyers.

The piece examines the government's failure to pass anti-SLAPPs legislation despite its previous commitments to do so, and the role of the Society of Media Lawyers in advocating against such legislation. It presents evidence suggesting that the Society's advocacy played an important role in persuading the government not to act.

The piece is based primarily on hundreds of pages of emails, letters and correspondence between the Society of Media Lawyers and government — as well as internal government discussions referencing the Society — released to Democracy for Sale under Freedom of Information legislation. The piece will name the Society of Media Lawyers and some of its members, and will report on various aspects of the correspondence and discussions contained in those documents, supported by conversations with sources close to the discussions around proposed anti-SLAPPs legislation.

There is a clear public interest in this story. As a responsible journalist, I am giving the Society an opportunity to respond to the points raised in the piece and to clarify questions about its makeup and operation. We welcome your cooperation and look forward to receiving your answers on or before our deadline of **16:00 British Summer Time, Thursday 2 April**.

Specifically, we will report the following:

1. Repeated correspondence shows the Society arguing that anti-SLAPPs legislation is unnecessary and could even embolden the media's worst excesses. In letters and emails from the Society, concerns about the use of SLAPPs to silence investigative journalists — and even victims of sexual abuse — are dismissed as "a misleading narrative presented by the media."
2. Former Conservative MP Charlotte Leslie has said: "It's clear from these documents that the Society of Media Lawyers conducted an aggressive lobbying campaign to kill off any prospect of sensible legislation that could threaten the UK's lucrative racket in libel lawfare." She added: "The documents also show the Society grotesquely mischaracterised a number of high-profile cases, including mine, to persuade ministers that there is no problem. The correspondence exposes a sector of the British legal

profession that is in complete denial about the threat it has posed to freedom of speech and the reputation of the UK's legal system."

How would you respond to Ms Leslie's characterisation?

3. The Society of Media Lawyers emerged in the summer of 2023, around the time that the then-Conservative government was passing new legislation to tackle financial crime that included anti-SLAPPs provisions.

Is this accurate?

4. Sources we have spoken to say that the Society's name is similar to that of the Media Lawyers Association, which represents in-house lawyers from much of the UK media, and that this represents "a deliberate attempt to appear as the voice of the industry, when they are anything but." One source added: "They could be done under the Copyright Act."

How would you respond to this?

5. Civil servants appear to have been wary of antagonising politically well-connected lawyers. In internal emails, officials described the Society as "packed with heavyweights, including peers" — among them lifelong Labour supporter Iain Wilson, a partner at Brett Wilson.

6. We will describe the Society's lobbying efforts as a discrete but highly effective campaign, spearheaded by high-profile libel lawyers. An MP who has seen the documents has described it as a "lobbying frenzy."

How would you respond to this characterisation?

7. After Labour came to power, the Ministry of Justice began to classify the Society of Media Lawyers as a "civil society organisation" alongside anti-SLAPPs campaigners. Lord Faulks described it as "very surprising" that civil servants were treating the Society in this way. "These are not disinterested stakeholders," he said. "Let's not forget this is pretty lucrative stuff for them."

8. The Society's letters to officials referenced the case of a woman, Nina Cresswell, who was sued for libel after she wrote a blog post and a series of social media posts accusing a tattoo artist, Billy Hays, of sexually assaulting her. Hays threatened legal action and the case proceeded to court, where a judge ruled in Cresswell's favour, finding that her account was "substantially true" and that her statements were "on a matter of public interest."

The Society described claims that libel law is used to silence victims of sexual crimes as "a misleading oversimplification," arguing that Cresswell's victory demonstrated that the current legal system is fit for purpose. Cresswell told us that despite winning the case, the protracted process had a "devastating impact" on her life and work. "I couldn't focus on work, I couldn't manage clients, because all my time was consumed with fighting off these legal threats," she said. "I know this isn't an oversimplification, because it literally happened to me. It's legal silencing."

How would you respond to this?

9. A Conservative MP has said that the Society's members "have helped create a multimillion-pound industry around suppressing free speech. In the process, they have become fabulously wealthy and have helped turn London into the global capital of SLAPPs." The MP added: "For the Ministry of Justice to look to those same lawyers for advice on whether SLAPPs are a problem would be laughable if the issue were not so serious."

10. In April 2024, the Society wrote to the then-Lord Chancellor Alex Chalk, warning that the bill was "entirely one-sided" and that "the Government should heed the lessons of the Leveson Inquiry and be very slow to hand further litigation advantage to the unregulated press." We will note that the Leveson Inquiry was triggered by unlawful phone hacking, not by libellous claims made in newspapers.

11. We will report that the Society sent Ministry of Justice officials a research paper which it said "undermines the evidential basis put forward by the previous government" for anti-SLAPPs legislation. The paper, written by Dr Paul Wragg, "benefitted from generous funding by the Society of Media Lawyers" and argues that numerous high-profile cases did not constitute SLAPPs.

How much funding did the Society provide towards Dr Wragg's paper, and who specifically paid for it?

13. In September 2025, the Society met with government officials. We will report that in February, the Times reported that justice minister Sarah Sackman had drafted anti-SLAPPs measures, but that the proposed legislation had been shelved — with a government source attributing this to fear of backlash from lawyers.

What was discussed at that meeting?

As mentioned above, we would welcome your responses to any or all of the above points, and any other comment you wish to make, on or before our deadline of **16:00 British Summer Time, Thursday 2 April**.

Yours sincerely,

Peter

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Peter Geoghegan

Editor, Democracy for Sale