Help us stop this legislation which threatens local press freedom

In a few weeks time a law could be passed that could lead to the closure of local newspapers – including the South London Press.

It will mean a time of up to 300 years for press freedom in this country – do you care enough to do something about it?

It’s all about Section 40 of the Criminal and Courts Act 2013 and you can have a say - the Government has opened a public consultation and is asking for your views.

This piece of legislation means newspapers paying the costs for anyone who wants to sue them – whether they are successful or not.

So it could lead to a number of spurious complaints made by people unhappy with something they have seen in print who could charge matters all the way to the High Court.

They can be in the knowledge that even if they eventually lose the case the newspaper will have to pay their costs.

So, for example if a newspaper wants to investigate a gap in a local authority’s expenditure, or a failure in its expense, for example, it may hold back from fear of legal action – even if it is in the public interest.

An editor, especially one sitting in a regional office with ever-declining budgets, would certainly think twice about running that story. Regionals, just like the South London Press, would be the most bitterly affected. At the South London Press we deal with a vast range of stories, mainly human interest, positive stories about good people doing good things across South London. But as we know not all people are good and a few of them are pretty bad and we do our best to report on that, it’s all part of our democracy.

So when a paedophile or a murderer gets convicted for example - we’ll do our best to report it. Sometimes a mother will ring up and ask why we published a story about her son being in court for murder. Why did we print such nasty things even when he’s been convicted for murder.

If he stabbed a boy to death in the street and court finds him guilty of murder, he’s a murderer.

A mother can still complain about how his character may have been mishandled. However, sometimes we do get it wrong, thankfully that’s irregular and we don’t like to make mistakes.

The Leveson Inquiry was set up to look into press standards as a result of failing standards and ethics at some of the national newspapers.

The Old Press Complaints Commission was wound up and pressure fell on the newspaper industry for tougher regulation.

Newspapers and magazines are being held to account by the Royal Charter and interlocking legislation in the Crime and Courts Acts 2013.

There was no parliamentary scrutiny of the Royal Charter’s terms nor any consultation with the press or the public.

It allows politicians to interfere in the regulation of the very voices which hold them and others in authority to account on behalf of their readers and investigate cases of corruption and wrongdoing.

Newspapers and magazines which have been found guilty by the Royal Charter now face the prospect of being punished in the courts for refusing to succumb to state press regulation.

Under the Crime and Courts Act 2013, they are ordered to pay punitive (damages) fines. If section 40 were brought into force, there could be orders to pay both sides costs, win or lose, for court actions brought, in breach of a misusage of private information.

Most newspapers have now joined the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) chaired by the highly experienced judge, Sir Alan Moses.

It can force newspapers to issue front page apologies and has the power to levy fines of up to £1 million. Believers, the press is no longer a free press. It is subject to a very high level of controls.

So even if the government/

IPSO - being an independent body – refuses to be overseen by politicians and, as such, politicians tend not to like it.

Politicians have, however, welcomed a regulator called Impress, which is largely funded by media tycoon Max Mosley. And he says Impress – which is his family charity – is “completely independent”.

Interestingly few, if any, of the Leveson recommendations were aimed particularly at local papers like the South London Press. In fact, Lord Justice Leveson praised the regional and local newspaper industry for its vital role in our society.

But we are left with Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013. With no parliamentary scrutiny.

The Government has opened a public consultation.

We must ensure this Section 40, puts freedom of speech and local democracy at risk.


The State Sponsored Royal Charter and interlocking legislation in the Crime and Courts Acts 2013 is the polar opposite of Leveson’s recommendation.

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