

Sent Electronically

Rt. Hon. Sir Keir Starmer KCB KC MP, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom

3rd March 2026

Dear Prime Minister,

We call on you to include universal Anti-SLAPP provisions in the 2026 King's Speech

We, the undersigned, academics working in a range of academic disciplines, support the [UK Anti-SLAPP Coalition](#) in calling for the inclusion of universal anti-SLAPP provisions in the next King's Speech anticipated in May 2026.¹ These provisions will help protect academic freedom - including critical research on matters of public interest - as a central pillar of civil society and healthy democracies.

Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) are abusive, often unmeritorious lawsuits or legal threats designed to silence critics by intimidating them with the cost and stress of legal defence. While SLAPPs are most frequently deployed against journalists, academics have also found themselves at the receiving end of legal threats by companies and wealthy individuals in response to critical research. As such, SLAPPs pose a threat to academic freedom alongside direct state censorship, physical attacks, imprisonment and (online) harassment. **Besides the immediate personal and professional risks to targeted academics, SLAPPs increase the risk of academic self-censorship; the likelihood that academics will avoid researching those in power; the cost of undertaking such research due to the required legal support; and limit academics' ability to disseminate research findings and effectively reach public and policymaking audiences.** As one academic put it at an expert roundtable on the threat of SLAPPs to academic freedom hosted by the UK Department of Justice in April 2024: *"I am sorry to say, I have personally withheld significant data on an individual that has had a corrosive impact on British democracy, because they are wealthy, highly litigious and at the time I was facing significant legal threats from a number of Russian and Malaysian actors, which limited my fighting capacity"*.

Currently, academics' ability to conduct critical research into powerful actors largely depends on the support of their employing institution. However, many universities do not provide insurance, legal reviews or, indeed, any support to mitigate these legal risks to their staff. Thus, many academics are expected to take on the costs or burden themselves. In a similar fashion, academic publishers often shift the risk to authors or journal editors, or refuse to publish research which might pose a risk of legal action (see [Persaud 2014](#) and [Wright et al.](#)

¹ The UK Anti-SLAPP Coalition is an informal working group established in January 2021, co-chaired by the Foreign Policy Centre, Index on Censorship and CliDef. It comprises a number of freedom of expression, whistleblowing, anti-corruption and transparency organisations, as well as media lawyers, researchers and academics who are researching, monitoring and highlighting cases of legal intimidation and SLAPPs, and seeking to develop remedies for mitigation and redress.

[2022](#) for further discussion). Especially in a context where academics are encouraged to participate in public engagement and impactful research, without concerted action, those who conduct vital research into the actions of the powerful will become increasingly vulnerable to costly, stressful and unpredictable legal action. This will become even more of a problem given growing inequality and oligarchic power worldwide.

Recent research has shown that SLAPPs are a global problem. [Markin \(2021:1\)](#) found recent defamation claims against scientists in the US pose a “*threat to scientific inquiry*” and “*represent efforts to quell scientists’ speech, generally because their research threatens established commercial interests*”. She concludes that “*reputational attacks are intimidating scientists, causing them to pursue fewer controversial lines of research*” (ibid; see also [NYU 2025](#)). In Canada, too, [Jacobsen et al. \(2025:1\)](#) report that while academics enjoy some protections in the courts, “*the prospect of civil litigation, with its attendant burdens of time and expense, nevertheless has a chilling effect on academic freedom*”. Legal threats bearing the hallmarks of a SLAPP have also been used against academics in [Denmark](#), [Belgium](#), [France](#), and [Poland](#) (see also [here](#) and [here](#)).

While SLAPPs are a global problem, England in particular has been identified as a premier location for ‘libel tourism’ due to its permissive legal provisions on defamation. Accordingly, a [2024 Parliamentary briefing](#) writes that “*claimants may choose to litigate in England even when the link with the jurisdiction is tenuous, because the law is seen to be ‘claimant friendly’ compared with other jurisdictions*”. Indeed, several cases in the UK bearing the hallmarks of SLAPPs, have targeted academics. For example, libel lawyers acting on behalf of Mohamed Amersi and Dmitry Leus successfully garnered changes to a Chatham House report authored by a group of academics, including Professor John Heathershaw, Dr Tena Prelec and Tom Mayne, regarding kleptocracies and suspicious sources of wealth ([Heathershaw, Prelec and Mayne 2025, 214-221](#)). In 2020, in Scotland, the former academic and then Green MSP Andy Wightman successfully defended himself against a £750,000 [defamation action](#) brought by Wildcat Haven Enterprises over historic blog posts about a conservation project, which he had written while in a previous academic role. In 2014, Professor Karen Dawisha, a Russia scholar was [dropped](#) by her long-time publisher Cambridge University Press over concerns that her book, ‘Putin’s Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?’, would attract libel cases in London.

The threat that SLAPPs pose to academic freedom is far from new. Already in 2007, [Karran \(2007:309\)](#) argued that the UK was “*the sick man of Europe*” in terms of legal protections of academic freedom, with “*no constitutional protection for either freedom of speech or academic freedom*”. From 2009, Sense about Science successfully led a ‘[Keep Libel Laws out of Science’ campaign](#), which led to the first protection of peer-reviewed academic research in the 2013 Defamation Bill. More recently, the UK Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act (ECCTA, 2023) acknowledged SLAPPs as an issue in law, and introduced, albeit flawed, measures to provide greater legal protection of reporting on economic crime.

However, such existing legal protections are insufficient to fully protect academic freedom. For instance, they remain legally untested; academic monographs and other outputs in non-peer-reviewed journals remain unprotected; not all research focuses on economic crime; and the complex work to identify the intentions or motivations of someone threatening legal action will mean academics seeking to defend themselves will still need significant funds to see the case through. Given that many SLAPPs are not meant to make it to court but to wear down the targeted critic, pre-court protective measures are especially needed. Without an effective early dismissal mechanism, an objective test for filtering SLAPPs out of court, and the ability to minimise costs and penalise bad conduct, courts and judges do not have the tools or guidance they need. Clearly the problem is not new and effective solutions are still needed.

The UK is not alone in facing a SLAPPs problem but it is now at risk of falling even further behind international allies in responding with protective legislation. Three Canadian provinces and 39 US states now have anti-SLAPP laws. The 27 European Union member states are currently transposing the EU Anti-SLAPP Directive. Especially given the UK is already a prime location for bringing legal actions, stronger protections elsewhere will only further encourage SLAPP perpetrators to exploit our jurisdiction to silence critical academic work. This call compliments the UK Government's mission to protect national security. Peace and security require constant vigilance, including critical research on powerful or hostile actors who pose a threat to UK democracy.

SLAPPs are thus **a society-wide issue that also affects academics and this issue requires a society-wide remedy. Now is the time for further and more concerted action.** Legislative action on SLAPPs already had cross-party support. By bringing forward universal anti-SLAPP measures in the next King's Speech, Parliament will finally be given the opportunity to establish robust and accessible protections against abusive legal threats and actions.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Justin Borg-Barthet, Head of School, School of Law, University of Aberdeen, UK

Dr Peter Coe, Associate Professor in Law, Birmingham Law School, University of Birmingham, UK

Dr Francesca Farrington, Lecturer, School of Law, University of Liverpool, UK

Dr Erin Ferguson, School of Law, University of Aberdeen, UK

Dr Mark Hanna, Senior Lecturer in Private Law, Faculty of Law, University of Canterbury Te Whare Wānanga O Waitaha, New Zealand

Professor John Heathershaw, Professor of International Relations, University of Exeter, UK

Dr Katie Higgins, Lecturer, School of Sociological Studies, Politics and International Relations, University of Sheffield, UK

Dr Sarah Kunz, Lecturer, Department of Sociology and Criminology, University of Essex, UK

Professor Kristian Lasslett, Professor of Criminology, Ulster University, UK

Tom Mayne, Research Fellow, DPIR, University of Oxford, UK

Professor Richard Moorhead, Professor of Law and Ethics, University of Exeter, Professor of Law, Monash University and Honorary Professor, UCL Faculty of Laws, London, UK

Dr Rebecca Moosavian, Associate Professor in Law, School of Law, University of Leeds, UK

Dr Tena Prelec, Lecturer, University of Rijeka, Croatia and Honorary Research Fellow, University of Exeter, UK

Dr Tara Mahfoud, Lecturer in Sociology, University of Essex, UK

Dr Angela Sherwood, Lecturer in law, Queen Mary University of London, UK

Professor Penny Green, Professor of Law and Globalisation , Queen Mary University of London, UK

Neve Gordon, Professor of human rights and international humanitarian law , School of Law, Queen Mary University of London, UK

Professor Geraint Ellis, Chair of Environmental Planning, Queen's University, Belfast

Dr David M Scott, British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow, Queen Mary University of London, United Kingdom

Dr Carlos Gigoux, Lecturer, Department of Sociology and Criminology, University of Essex, UK

Dr Nabeela Ahmed, Lecturer, University of Sheffield, UK

Neli Demireva, Professor of Sociology, University of Essex, UK

Professor Martin Scott , Professor of Media and Global Development, University of East Anglia, UK

Professor Renee Luthra, Professor, University of Essex, UK

Professor Mel Bunce, Professor of International Journalism and Director Centre for Journalism and Democracy, City St George's, University of London, UK

Professor Robert Barrington, Professor of Anti-Corruption Practice, Centre for the Study of Corruption, University of Sussex, UK

Professor Mike Savage, Professorial Research Fellow, London School of Economics, UK

Prof Liz David-Barrett, Professor of Governance & Integrity, Centre for the Study of Corruption, University of Sussex, UK

Dr David Schley CMath Char.PR CSci , Deputy Director, Sense about Science, UK

Tracey Brown OBE, Director, Sense about Science, UK

Dr Paul Robert Gilbert, Reader in Development, Justice & Inequality, University of Sussex, UK

Peter Strachan, Doctoral Research Student, Glasgow Caledonian University, UK

Dr Caroline Barrett, Lecturer, University of York, UK

Dr Emma Taylor, Lecturer in Education, King's Academy, King's College London, UK

Dr. Bryan Boyle, Postdoctoral Researcher, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, Germany

Dr Bob Jeffery, Senior Lecturer in Sociology, Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Professor Rowland Atkinson, Professor, University of Sheffield, UK

Professor Penny Green, Professor of Law and Globalisation, Queen Mary University of London, UK

Dr Anna Bull, Senior Lecturer, University of York, UK

Professor Tony Ward, Professor in Law, Northumbria University, UK

Dr Darren Thiel, Lecturer, University of Essex, UK

Professor Sam Friedman, Professor, LSE, UK

Professor Heather Marquette, Professor in Development Politics, University of Birmingham, UK

Dr Roxana Pessoa Cavalcanti, Senior lecturer, University of Bristol, UK

Emeritus Professor Paul M Heywood, Professor Emeritus of Politics, University of Nottingham, Visiting Professor, Centre for the Study of Corruption, University of Sussex, UK

Professor John Gaventa, Professor, Institute of Development Studies, UK

Professor Gary Fooks, Professor of Criminology, University of Bristol, UK

Dr Natasha Mulvihill, Associate Professor in Criminology, University of Bristol, UK

Sobia Kaker, Lecturer, University of Essex, UK

Dr Sam Power, Lecturer in Politics, University of Bristol, UK

Adrija Dey, Reader, University of Westminster, UK

Professor Aaron Reeves, Professor of Sociology, LSE, UK

Dr Vladimir Bortun, Lecturer in Politics, St. John's College, University of Oxford, UK

Professor Anna Sergi, Full professor of sociology of law and deviance | Honorary Professor, University of Bologna, Italy | University of Essex, UK

Aeron Davis, Professor, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand / Goldsmiths, University of London, UK

Dr. Jonathan Preminger, Senior Lecturer, Cardiff University, UK

Sam Cooper, Associate Professor, Imperial College London, UK

Ursula Smartt, Associate Professor of Law, Northeastern University London, UK

Caroline Knowles, Honorary Professor, Queen Mary University of London, UK

Dr Jon Dean, Associate Professor, Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Dr Tom Mills, Senior Lecturer, Department of Society and Politics, Aston University, UK

Dr Omar Shahabudin McDoom, Associate Professor, London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

Dr Matt Reynolds, Research Officer, London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

Nikhil Kalyanpur, Assistant Professor, London School of Economics, UK

Professor Alice Sullivan, Professor of Sociology, University College London (UCL), UK

Michael Stewart, Professor of Anthropology, UCL, UK

Professor Abhishek Saha, Professor of Mathematics, Queen Mary University of London, UK

Professor Ralph Wilde, Professor of International Law, Faculty of Laws, University College London, University of London, UK

Alice Krozer, Professor, Centre for Sociological Studies, El Colegio de México, Mexico

Dr Rafaella Lima, Postdoctoral research fellow, University of Sheffield, UK

Prof Umberto Albarella, Professor of Zooarchaeology, University of Sheffield, UK

Frank Maracchione, ESRC Postdoctoral fellow, SOAS University of London, UK

Dr Edward Skidelsky, Senior Lecturer in Philosophy and Director of the Committee for Academic Freedom, University of Exeter, UK

Dr Megan Blomfield, Senior Lecturer, University of Sheffield, UK

Mohammad Sahid Ullah, Professor, University of Chittagong, Bangladesh

Professor Ursula Cheer, Professor, Faculty of Law University of Canterbury, New Zealand

Professor Dennis Hayes, Emeritus Professor of Education, University of Derby, UK

Dr Stuart Waiton, Senior lecturer, Abertay University

Professor David Paton, Chair of Industrial Economics, Nottingham University Business School, UK

Magdalena Zabrocka, Teaching Associate in Law / PhD Candidate, University of Nottingham / University of Aberdeen (PhD), UK

Dr András Koltay, Professor of Law, Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest, Hungary

Professor Sir David Spiegelhalter, Emeritus Professor of Statistics, University of Cambridge, UK

Dr Bobby Lindsay, Senior Lecturer in Private Law, University of Glasgow, UK

Dr Daniel R Smith, Senior Lecturer in Sociology , Cardiff University, Wales, UK

Professor Laura Murphy, Professor of Human Rights, Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Dr Lioba Hirsch, Lecturer in Social Anthropology, University of Edinburgh, UK

Dr Srilata Sircar, Senior Lecturer in Critical Geography, King's College London, UK

Dr Zsófia Boda, Senior Lecturer, Department of Sociology and Criminology, University of Essex, UK

Dr Sonia Bussu, Associate Professor, University of Birmingham, UK

Dr Silvia Bartolini , Associate Professor in EU law, UCLille, France

Ricki-Lee Gerbrandt, Fellow in Law, University College London, UK

Professor Robin Lovell-Badge, CBE, FRS, FMedSci, Principal Group Leader, The Francis Crick Institute, UK

Dr Stephen Jeffares, Associate Professor in Public Policy, University of Birmingham, UK

Dr Regan Koch, Senior Lecturer, Department of Geography, Queen Mary University of London, UK

Dr Eoin O'Dell, Associate Professor, School of Law, Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin, Republic of Ireland

Dr Laura Clancy, Lecturer, Lancaster University, UK

Dr Samuel Burgum, Research Associate, Urban Institute, University of Sheffield, UK

Dr Victoria Habermehl, Lecturer in Urban Studies and International Development,
Geography and Planning, University of Sheffield, UK

Professor Linsey McGoey, Professor, Department of Sociology and Criminology, University
of Essex, UK

Professor Peggy Froerer, Professor of Anthropology, Brunel, University of London, UK

Professor Sheena Vachhani, Professor of Work and Organisation, University of Bristol, UK

Dr Aidan Mosselson, Lecturer, University of Edinburgh, UK

Professor Bridget Anderson, Professor of Migration, Mobilities and Citizenship, University of
Bristol, UK