# Northern Ireland's Anonymity Law for Sex Offence Suspects Ruled Incompatible with Press Freedom and Human Rights



A Northern Ireland law granting anonymity to sex offence suspects until they are charged has been ruled incompatible with press freedom and human rights by a High Court judge. Introduced through the Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, the law prevented naming suspects before they were charged or for 25 years after their death.

Mr. Justice Humphreys declared that the law exceeded Stormont’s legislative competence, asserting it imposed a "chilling effect" on public interest journalism. This decision follows a legal challenge led by media organizations including the Belfast Telegraph and The Irish News. The challenge argued that the restrictions failed to balance suspects' privacy rights with the press's freedom of expression, enshrined in Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

Passed following a review by retired judge Sir John Gillen, the Act uniquely positioned Northern Ireland compared to the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland. The law faced criticism for potentially silencing victims and inhibiting the exposure of notorious offenders.

The High Court recognized that the legislation did not rationally accommodate public interest journalism and restricted press freedom by criminalizing publication without a public interest defense. The judge stated that a fair balance between competing rights was absent, deeming the contested sections "not law" and beyond the legislative scope of the Northern Ireland Assembly.