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**Libel lawyer: I did not lobby DUP to block bill**



Paul Tweed, a leading libel lawyer

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**Belfast’s most prominent libel lawyer has said that he did not lobby DUP Finance Minister Sammy Wilson to block British libel reforms extending to Northern Ireland.**

During a hearing of Stormont’s Finance Committee yesterday, Paul Tweed said that he had never even spoken to or met Mr Wilson.

Mr Tweed told MLAs that his opposition to the Defamation Bill – which strengthens protections on free speech for journalists, bloggers, scientists and others – was out of conviction that it was wrong and that he was “not some greedy lawyer trying to line his pockets”.

Last year, Mr Wilson blocked the Westminster Bill from extending to Northern Ireland but did not bring the issue to the Executive. The move only emerged earlier this year after a question in the House of Lords.

NI21 MLA John McCallister asked Mr Tweed whether he had entirely separated his work for senior politicians from the debate about libel reform and asked whether he had any conversations with Executive ministers or whether there had been “any lobbying on that level”.

Mr Tweed said: “Absolutely none whatsoever. I’ve never met Mr Wilson; I’ve never spoken to him.” He said that there was “no need to do that” and that he had first read about Mr Wilson’s decision in a newspaper earlier this year.

Mr Tweed argued that libel reformers’ argument that free speech needs to be strengthened to protect academics and responsible journalism was actually about a “non issue” and he said that it should be made easier, not harder, to sue for defamation.

Mr Tweed said that warnings Belfast could become a worldwide libel capital – a claim made by, among others, the leading lawyer Lord Lester – were “totally misconceived”.

He said that “online bloggers are a massive difficulty” and revealed that he had sent legal letters to the blog NAMAwinelake which charted the Irish property crash, leading to the site being halted earlier this year.

However, Mr Tweed pointed out that many libel claimants faced being “financially ruined” if they took a libel case where the publisher could prove that what was said was true.

Mr Tweed – who has in recent years acted on behalf of Ian Paisley Jnr and Peter Robinson – told MLAs that he had represented members of all political parties in Northern Ireland. Later, UUP leader Mike Nesbitt told the committee that he knew Mr Tweed both socially and professionally and had asked him to send a letter to someone making allegations about him on the internet.

**Background**

Paul Tweed argued against the Defamation Bill’s move to abolish juries in libel trials, something he argued was a fundamental right.

He said that he had never been involved in a case where the jury had got the decision wrong.

But NI21 MLA John McCallister asked Mr Tweed about the infamous libel case taken against the Irish News for a restaurant review, where the jury got its decision disastrously wrong, forcing the paper into a costly appeal, where the jury’s decision was eventually overturned. That case was one of the key reasons behind the libel reform campaign in London.

Mr Tweed said that was a “fair point” but claimed there were “other legal factors in that decision”.