

EU Parliament to rule on UKIP MEP's immunity

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News

Parliament has confirmed it will rule on the immunity of a British MEP who faces potentially crippling legal costs in a libel case.



UK Independence Party MEP Jane Collins has invoked legal immunity afforded to her by the Parliament in a slander and libel case brought against her in a British court.

Three British MPs are seeking damages against Collins after she said they knew "all about" the scandal of 1400 cases of grooming and rape of young girls in the Yorkshire town of Rotherham and had done nothing to intervene.

The judge in the case recently said he thought it "improbable" immunity from paying damages would be granted but suspended proceedings until Parliament had had an opportunity to investigate her application.

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On Wednesday, a Parliament spokesperson told this website, "Ms Collins had been invited to be heard by the legal affairs committee this month, but she didn't make it citing ill health. The next hearing is scheduled for the legal affairs committee meeting in July.

"Should Ms Collins still not have been able to attend, the committee will proceed with drawing up its report and recommendation to the plenary session. That recommendation will need to be voted by Parliament at the session immediately following the committee meeting where the recommendation has been adopted."

Further comment came from Tory MEP Timothy Kirkhope, who, like Collins, is an MEP for the Yorkshire and Humber region.

He said, "She regularly rails against the European Parliament, so to then use it as a shield from the British legal system is the height of hypocrisy."

Collins is a member of Parliament's employment and social affairs committee and is her party's employment spokesperson. She sits with other UKIP deputies in the EFDD group and was elected in 2014.

Collins had claimed in the court case that as an elected MEP she enjoys a blanket immunity from any legal action taken against her.

The three MPs taking legal action are Sarah Champion, John Healey and Sir Kevin Barron. Their neighbouring constituencies cover Rotherham.

The allegations were made in a speech Collins made at the UKIP conference held at Doncaster Racecourse in September 2014 and broadcast live on the BBC Parliament Channel. The three MPs subsequently sued here over the allegations, describing them as "deeply damaging and totally baseless".

At the time Collins had been selected as the candidate to stand against Champion in her Rotherham seat at the 2014 UK general election.

Legal immunity for MEPs has existed under European law since 1965 but in limited circumstances.

Parliament's rules state MEPs "shall not be subject to any form of inquiry, detention or legal proceedings in respect of opinions expressed or votes cast by them in the performance of their duties" and additionally receive the same privileges as national MPs.

Parliament has the right to waive the immunity of any of its members and it is not yet clear whether immunity applies in this case.

A UKIP spokesperson declined to comment.

About the author

Martin Banks is a journalist for the Parliament Magazine

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