

NSS condemns Government's callous disregard for UK victims of caste discrimination

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The National Secular Society has criticised the Government's "callous" disregard for victims of caste discrimination in the UK after MPs rejected a Lords amendment to make discrimination on grounds of caste unlawful.

The House of Lords voted last month by a majority of 103, despite Government opposition, to make caste a protected characteristic (as an aspect of race) under equality law via a new clause in the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill.

Today's vote in the Commons was lost by 243 votes to 307, with the Government speaking against the amendment. It will return to the Lords on Monday 22 April.

Equalities minister Jo Swinson told MPs that she thought legislation could increase stigma rather than ease the problem. She said: "This is an issue that is contained in the Hindu and Sikh communities. That's why we are working with those communities to address these problems."

However, Conservative MP Richard Fuller said: "This is a straightforward issue, caste discrimination in the work place is wrong and the people who suffer from it deserve legal protection. That's it. Beginning and end."

"Meena Varma of the Dalit Solidarity Network said: "I am very disappointed. But we'll keep going until we get this legislation."

Keith Porteous Wood, executive director of the National Secular Society, which has campaigned for several years for caste discrimination to be made unlawful, commented: "I hope that peers will seize the opportunity next week to vote once more in favour of making caste discrimination unlawful, reversing the Government's cynical and callous rejection of it today. In opposing statutory protection now, the Government has kicked the issue into the long grass, shamelessly abandoning its international Human Rights obligations, instead apparently paying greater heed to those, however influential, who have a vested interest in perpetuating this debasing discrimination."

The National Secular Society has obtained a legal opinion, supported by leading equality lawyers, showing that the UK's failure to outlaw caste discrimination is a violation of Article 2(1) and 6 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. The UN has formally recommended amending the Equality Act 2010 to make caste discrimination unlawful "in accordance with [the UK's] international human rights obligations".

Mr Porteous Wood said: "The Government's alternative of 'informal conciliation' is toothless and entirely inadequate, given the power wielded by those of high caste – often the [employers of those subjected to caste discrimination](#), and the widespread and endemic nature of caste discrimination."

Prior to today's vote, The Christian Institute and the National Secular Society sent a [joint letter to conservative and LibDem MPs](#) urging them to support the Lords amendment.

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