

NSS joins campaign to oppose Lobbying Bill

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The controversial Lobbying Bill could cause issue-based campaigners and charities to be "frozen out" of politics, a columnist has warned.

Stephen Naysmith said in *The Herald* newspaper that "if the Lobbying Bill has the suffocating effect many people in the charity world fear", it won't be easy to hear from groups which stick up for the "marginalised and disenfranchised".

A special commission supported by close to 40 charities, campaign groups and academics, published a report yesterday urging the Government to put the Bill on hold.

The Commission on Civil Society and Democratic Engagement, which is backed by various groups including The Christian Institute and the National Secular Society, warned that freedom of expression could be "severely restricted" and "unduly" curtailed.

The report was launched in the House of Lords this week, in a meeting attended by 26 Peers and 50 representatives of voluntary groups.

The commission's chair, former Bishop of Oxford Lord Harries, warned in the foreword to the report that the Bill "risks profoundly undermining the very fabric of our democracy".

The Transparency of Lobbying, Non-party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Bill introduces new rules to control how not-for-profit organisations speak out on issues in the 365 days before a general election.

Lord Harries said: "Whether we agree with these organisations or not, their role is essential in order to have an informed, engaged electorate."

Full-page adverts appeared in three national newspapers last week calling for change to the legislation.

Over 40 voluntary groups from many different backgrounds backed the ads, saying they "may not see eye to eye" on many issues, but they are "united in concern" over this Bill which could undermine democracy.

The Bill was debated in the House of Lords last week, and Mr Naysmith says it was "savaged" by Peers.

Only three Peers supported the Bill out of 40 who spoke, and it will reach committee stage next Tuesday.

Mr Naysmith said: "The objections aren't going away, but are so far going unheard by politicians."

The Government says charities and campaign groups are not intended to be affected.

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