

I thought you might find it useful if I brought you up to date on the progress of the Lobbying Bill since it completed its line-by-line scrutiny in the House of Lords. The Government listened very carefully to the concerns that you and others had expressed about any possible unintended consequences of aspects of the Bill. The House of Lords made a number of constructive amendments to the Bill, while staying true to its core purpose of bringing more public transparency to levels of spending in election campaigns. Last week I voted to agree with the great majority of those amendments.

You will recall that spending in elections by companies, individuals and other organisations is only regulated if it “can be reasonably be regarded as intended to promote or procure the election of a party or candidates” – something that very few organisations other than political parties do.

The law currently requires companies, individuals and other third parties to register with the Electoral Commission if they spend over £10,000 on election campaigning (£5,000 in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). Some groups said they were worried about whether they have to register as third parties. As a result of the amendments agreed to, these registration thresholds will now be doubled to £20,000 (£10,000 in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). This means that the vast majority of organisations will never need to worry about whether they need to register with the Electoral Commission at all.

Other amendments made in the House of Lords and which I voted to agree to include:

- removing the requirement for third parties who do register to make any report to the Electoral Commission if they turn out not to spend more than the threshold;
- allowing third parties who are part of a coalition to report through a single lead member, rather than individually;
- making the regulated period come into effect from September 2014, rather than May 2014, to allow the Electoral Commission time to issue comprehensive guidance;
- having a statutory review of how the rules are working following the 2015 General Election.

These amendments, proposed by the Government following consultation with interested parties, were widely welcomed by many of the organisations who had expressed concern that the Bill as originally drafted might have some unintended consequences. The Chief Executive of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, Sir Stuart Etherington, said:

*“We are grateful that the Government has listened to the concerns charities have raised in recent months.*

*The Bill provides a much more sensible balance than it did to begin with between creating accountability and transparency in elections, while still allowing for charities and others to speak up on issues of concern.”*

All of the amendments made by the House of Lords were considered by the House of Commons on Wednesday. In the part of the Bill concerning third party campaigning in elections, 97 amendments from the House of Lords were debated, many of which were proposed by groups who were consulted during the Bill's passage. Of these amendments, 94 were accepted in full.

I disagreed with 3 of the 97 amendments. I am sure you will agree that it would not support the principle of transparency for charitable bodies, for example, to be able to spend unlimited funds employing staff and setting up phone banks in order to support a political candidate or party during an election. That is why the Government opposed the withdrawal of a limit on staffing costs and on the cost of phone banks. As I am sure you will recognise, this represents a very substantial measure of agreement.

The remaining three amendments where there has not so far been a consensus will now be reconsidered by the House of Lords. Both Houses need to be in agreement before the Bill completes its scrutiny.

I am grateful to you for the interest that you have taken in the Bill, which has helped inform the debate. I'm sure as it nears the completion of its parliamentary scrutiny you will welcome the very good progress that has been made.