

Britain's government suppresses "third-party" campaigns

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Under the guise of making "lobbying" more "transparent", the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition has published a parliamentary bill attacking campaigning by non-official party groups.

The Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Bill seriously limits the campaigning ability of "third parties", ie., trade unions, charities and websites not affiliated to political parties—during a "regulated" period, which could be up to a year, in the lead up to local, European, and parliamentary elections.

Under conditions of widespread disillusionment with the main parliamentary parties, the aim of the bill is to stifle unofficial campaigns, particularly on the Internet. Latest figures show that membership of the Conservative Party has collapsed from nearly three million in 1951 to 177,000 in 2011 and for Labour from 876,000 to 190,000.

The bill targets "consultant lobbyists"—organisations or individuals—whose main business is lobbying but is expanded to include any form of campaigning that "might lead" to voters backing certain candidates or parties. It effectively shelters big corporations where lobbying, on which they spend millions a year, is only a small part of their expenditure. While activists and campaigners will be silenced, the rights of the oil corporations, the tobacco industry and others remain untouched.

Under the proposed legislation, "consultant lobbyists" will be punishable by fines if they do not register, a process that may cost £20,000. Anyone can be removed from the register under the deliberately vague "other circumstances". Those who are refused registration and subsequently campaign will face prosecution.

It will be an offence for a third party to spend more

than £5,000 in England, or £2,000 in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland without registering or failing to file a return on expenditure. Quarterly reports of donations above a certain size and weekly reports during regulated periods have to be published. Current rules only count the costs of campaign materials, but the new ones include volunteer time, travel expenses, press conferences, public meetings, leaflets, and posts on social media and websites, etc.

The bill also limits the overall amount a non-party can spend on election material in the regulated period. For a general election campaign, the limit is reduced from £988,500 to £390,000—an amount a large organisation or coalition of organisations could easily spend on a demonstration or a big poster campaign.

The pretext for the bill was the latest in a long line of corruption scandals involving Members of Parliament and the House of Lords. In June, a BBC "Panorama" programme showed Conservative MP Patrick Mercer prepared to accept £4,000 to lobby for a scam company in Fiji as did Ulster Unionist Lord John Laird for £2,000 a month. Labour's Lord Cunningham offered to lobby Prime Minister David Cameron on behalf of a solar energy company, ask parliamentary questions and "get other people to ask questions as well" in return for a £12,000 a month payment. Labour Lord Brian Mackenzie, a former Durham police chief superintendent and Police Superintendents Association president, said he could arrange parties in parliament for lobbyists.

But as one big corporate lobbyist, the International Fair Trade Federation's director of government affairs, Dominick Moxon-Tritsch, declared "this bill would have done nothing to prevent the recent string of lobbying scandals".

The bill was rushed through parliament, introduced

on July 17, the last day before the parliamentary recess and first debated immediately after the recess, in early September, where it was passed by 296 votes to 247.

Trades Union Congress General Secretary Frances O'Grady criticised the bill saying it limited campaigns against fascist parties (such as the TUC backed Hope not Hate campaign), breached the privacy of trade union members [the legislation requires unions to keep membership lists up to date] and did nothing to tackle lobbying. Despite acknowledging the bill as a major attack on democratic rights, her only proposals were to put pressure on MPs and press for a future Labour government to reverse the legislation. It was the Labour Party, which first put in place national limits on spending at elections by non-party campaigners in 2000.

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Lawyer Helen Mountfield QC, on behalf of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, an umbrella organisation over 10,000 members, warned that the bill could violate the European Convention on Human Rights.

"This uncertainty about what the law requires is likely to have a chilling effect on freedom of expression, by putting small organisations and their trustees/directors in fear of criminal penalty if they speak out on matters of public interest and concern with a view to affecting the law on relevant issues...the restrictions and restraints are so wide and so burdensome as arguably to amount to a disproportionate restraint on freedom of expression," Mountfield explained.

Mountfield gave as examples of those curtailed by the new legislation an anti-poverty organisation, which advocates spending on overseas aid, a health charity publishing an anti-smoking leaflet, publication of a charity's "manifesto for the next government" on its website, or organising a public meeting or demonstration in support of a policy which one or more parties has adopted.

Conservative Leader of the House of Commons Andrew Lansley has indicated that the government may tackle charity concerns following their criticisms of the bill, saying, "The campaigning by third parties at the last election was not in any substantial way undertaken by charities... So the idea that charities are in any way

constrained is completely wrong."

As with all English law, however, the bill's scope will only be determined through precedent and in line with the venal and anti-democratic aims of the ruling elite. As a result of this legislation, the *World Socialist Web Site* could be threatened with penalties should Socialist Equality Party candidates stand in the UK 2015 general election.



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