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An open letter to the government on the Lobbying Bill [1]

Written by **Sam Bowman** [2] | Tuesday 3 September 2013

The government's Lobbying Bill is a serious threat to free speech and will curb the activities of think tanks, charities and other groups whose participation in political debate is vital for the political system to work openly. That's why we've co-signed the letter from other think tanks, below, urging the government to drop this bill.

We wish to highlight our grave concern about the Government?s Lobbying Bill, a piece of legislation that poses a significant threat to legitimate campaigning freedom of speech, political activism and informed public debate.

Part II of the bill threatens the ability of charities, research and campaigning organisations to inform the public debate, fulfil their missions and raise awareness of important issues. The current drafting would capture a huge number of organisations who would not presently be considered as relevant to electoral law and who do not receive any state funding. It also threatens to dramatically expand the range of activity regulated far beyond any common sense understanding of commercial lobbying.

We do not regard the Cabinet Office?s assurances as sufficient given the widespread legal doubts expressed from across the political spectrum. It cannot be a prudent approach to legislate on the basis of assurances that enforcement will not be to the full extent of the law. The exceptions offered are unclear and unconvincing.

The lack of clarity in the legislation further exacerbates its complexity, while granting a remarkably broad discretion to the Electoral Commission. The potential tidal wave of bureaucracy could cripple even well-established organisations, while forcing groups to reconsider activity if there is a perceived risk of falling foul of the law. This self-censorship is an inevitable consequence of the bill as it stands.

We urge the Government to reconsider its approach and to urgently address the fundamental failings in this legislation.

Yours Sincerely,

Mark Littlewood, Director General, Institute for Economic Affairs
Simon Richards, Director, The Freedom Association
Tim Knox, Director, Centre for Policy Studies
Matthew Sinclair, Chief Executive, Taxpayers? Alliance
Jo Glanville, Director, English PEN
Emma Carr, Deputy Director, Big Brother Watch
Eamonn Butler, Director, Adam Smith Institute

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