Press freedom threatened by changes to data bill, says peers

Matthew Moore - Media Correspondent

Investigations into scandals such as sex grooming would be harder to publish under proposals to strip press freedom, peers warned last night.

Amendments to the Data Protection Bill, which were tabled in the Lords to protect the privacy of journalists, were defeated.

The Bill envisages a general right of individuals to access to personal information held by others, and to have it corrected if inaccurate or misleading.

But the Lords heard that such access could be restricted if there was "likely interference with privacy", or where information was held "by a public authority for a public interest purpose".

It was feared that local authorities and others might use the amendments to restrict access to material, especially under "public interest" rules.

An amendment by Labour peer Lord Macpherson of Clwyd and proposed by Sir John Major would have allowed any journalist who had been the subject of a freedom of information request to be the claimant, not the data subject.

But Lord Macpherson's amendment was defeated by 251 votes to 229.

The government amendment on data protection for journalists was agreed by 253 votes to 210.

Conservative peer Lord Melville, who supported the amendment, said: "It is a bit like trying to engineer an exit." But he added that the amendment would be "still in place" after next week's electoral vote.

A second batch of amendments would effectively require print titles to join an officially recognised press regulator in order to handle private data matters.

The only regulator that has sought Royal Charter recognition is Impress, which was approved by the Lords in January. It is headed by former Tory MP Max Mosley, the former Formula One boss turned privacy campaigner who has led a "profoundly dangerous" attempt to "warp" the original intentions of the bill.

At the committee stage in the Lords, Lord Black of Brentwood, a Conservative peer and executive director of Tele- graph Media Group, described the amendment as a "profoundly dangerous" attempt to "warp" the original intentions of the bill.

Lord Lester of Herne Hill, a barrister and Liberal Democrat peer who opposes the amendments, said: "Investigations into whistleblowing, which will become more difficult to publish.

The Lords will vote on the amendment this week. They are expected by ministers from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, who are responsible for the Bill, to support the amendment.

Labour indicated that it had not come to a view about whether to support the amendments.

Inflation may add £26bn to UK debt costs

Olivier Wright - Policy Editor

Philip Hammond was warned today by the government's official auditors that a 1 per cent rise in inflation caused by Brexit could push up the cost of borrowing by £26 billion.

Sir Amyas Morse, head of the National Audit Office (NAO), said that the high levels of government borrowing since the financial crash meant that there were already "significant risks" to the UK's finances. He added that these "risk events" would "translate into borrowing costs", including the nature of the UK's departure from the EU.

"At present, the onus is on the government to fix that in future," Mr Morse said. "Parties also benefit from indirect state funding in the form of political broadcasts and free postage at elections."

State funding for politicians has been suggested in the wake of several funding scandals, including New Labour's cash-for-peerages row, but would prove a contentious move.

"It would not inevitably be interpreted as an attack on Nick Timothy and Fiona Hill, Mrs May's former chief of staff," Mr Morse said. "But any change would be "handful" of special advisers of misusing "unjustified power" and acting as "attack dogs" for ministers.

Suggesting a "leak and you're out" policy to slash the number of special advisers, he said: "Some advisers — with intellect but little judgment — are easy prey for the media.

"We have found that funding through state grants to parties can make it more difficult for parties to have access to cash from their own funds, which can be a source of additional funds to parties," he added.

"The quango state is a particularly sorry state, and it is clear that the state funding process is in need of reform," he said.

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