

LACK OF LORDS SPONSOR WRECKS PLAN TO EXEMPT MPs FROM FOI ACT

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A move to exempt parliament from the Freedom of Information Act appeared to have collapsed last night, when no peer came forward to sponsor the private member's bill lodged by the former Tory chief whip, David Maclean, in the Lords.

Supporters had hoped that Lord Trefgarne, the former Tory defence minister, would promote the measure, which against all odds has passed through the Commons after government whips and the leader of the house, Jack Straw, refused to block it. Many supporters of Gordon Brown, the prime minister in waiting, were also in favour of the bill seeking to restrict further the release of MPs' correspondence.

The Public Bill Office in the Lords confirmed that no peer had come forward to sponsor the bill by yesterday's 5pm deadline. Although it is still technically possible to revive the measure, opponents said it should now be abandoned.

Labour MP David Winnick said he was "absolutely delighted" the bill had failed to find a sponsor.

"It is unfortunate that it has been left to the second chamber to hopefully bury this nasty bill. I only hope that no further attempt will be made to revive the measure," he said.

The Liberal Democrats' leader in the Lords, Lord McNally, said that it was highly unlikely "this squalid little bill" would ever reach the statute book.

There was an outcry after the bill was passed last month by the Commons.

Although the government is officially neutral, opponents suspect it has been tacitly helping the measure.

The Tory frontbench was also thought to be sympathetic, although David Cameron has said the Conservatives would not support it in its present form if it came to a vote in the Lords.

Under parliamentary rules, a sponsor has to come forward within 12 sitting days of the bill being introduced in the Lords if it is to proceed. That period expired yesterday. The measure could be taken up again, but a sponsor would have to give eight days' notice of his or her intention to back the measure.

However, with parliamentary time running out as the summer recess approaches, Lord McNally said the government would have to make "extraordinary arrangements" to keep it alive.

Source: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/freedom/Story/0,,2102700,00.html>