

"My lords, I'm grateful to be contributing to this debate in response to His Majesty's most humble address, most gracious speech, and it's an honour to be following such excellent maiden speeches. And I declare my interest as the Director of the Free Speech Union.

I want to speak to your Lordships about the Removal of Peerages Bill, which, as my noble friend Lord True said, will need to be looked at very carefully lest it ever become a licence for the social media lynch mob. He referred to it as 'Peter's Law' since it's clearly inspired by the government's desire to punish Lord Mandelson, and therein lies the problem.

The threshold for removal will have to be low enough to bring Lord Mandelson's behavior within scope, which means removal will almost certainly not be limited to peers who've been convicted of a criminal offense. It will also, of necessity, be retrospective since the sins the government wants to punish Lord Mandelson for are those he's already committed.

I fear the threshold will be something along the lines of 'bringing the House into disrepute.' And I know from numerous cases the Free Speech Union has fought that this is a nebulous standard that's easily weaponized by political activists seeking to punish their opponents.

I'll give just one example, my Lords. That is the case of **Anil Bhanot**, a Hindu community leader who was awarded an OBE in 2010 for fostering community cohesion. In January 2024, he received a letter from the Honours Forfeiture Committee, which sits in the Cabinet Office, informing him it was minded to recommend he be stripped of his OBE because, and I quote, 'he had brought the honors system into disrepute.'

What had he done, my Lords?

Following a campaign by Muslim activists, the committee had received a number of complaints about replies Mr. Bhanot made to social media posts some three years earlier regarding the murder of Hindus by mobs of Islamists in Bangladesh. Those replies, according to the committee, were 'Islamophobic,' and it singled out one in which Mr. Bhanot said that the accusations of Islamophobia were sometimes used as a weapon to chill free speech. That in itself—that argument in itself, said the Cabinet Office, was an example of Islamophobia.

Now, the same complaints that were made to the Forfeiture Committee about Mr. Bhanot were also made to the police, the Charity Commission, and the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales. All three cleared Mr. Bhanot, but not the Forfeiture Committee. It went ahead and stripped him of his OBE.

My Lords, would members of this House be at risk of being stripped of their peerages for saying something similar? Even for making the same point in this House? Parliamentary

privilege might not protect us, since the Conduct Committee can consider complaints about things said on the floor of the House—and I assume that the committee would play a part in deciding whether noble Lords should be stripped of their titles.

If that's a genuine risk, Peter's Law will inevitably have a **chilling effect** on what peers feel at liberty to say, including in this House.

When arguing for Peter's Law earlier this year, the noble Baroness, the Leader of the House, said the reason the government is bringing it forward is to restore the public's confidence in the integrity of Parliament. But if it ends up preventing peers speaking out about matters of national importance for fear of being accused of bringing the House into disrepute, it will **further erode the reputation of Parliament**, and not restore it."