



HOUSE OF LORDS

Select Committee on Charities
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The Rt Hon Baroness Evans of Bowes Park
Leader of the House and Lord Privy Seal
House of Lords

20 July 2016

Dear Leader

I am writing as Chairman of the Select Committee on Charities to express my concern at the decision of Rob Wilson MP, Minister for Civil Society, to withdraw from his scheduled appearance before the Committee on Tuesday 19 July.

The staff of the Committee originally contacted the Office for Civil Society and Innovation in June with an invitation for officials to participate in a public hearing on 5 July. The hearing was intended to help the Committee gain an understanding of how civil servants were helping to implement Government policy priorities. It was also intended to help inform our initial scoping work prior to the publication of our Call for Evidence and our preparations for a wider evidence programme in the autumn. This is a standard part of committee inquiries and the evidence from officials is often of great value.

Shortly before the 5 July hearing was due to take place, the Committee was advised that the Minister did not wish to send officials and that he would prefer to attend the hearing in person, as is his right under the Osmotherly rules. To this end, the Committee agreed to reschedule the hearing with the Office for Civil Society and Innovation for 19 July, a date on which we were informed the Minister would be available. The Director of the Office for Civil Society and Innovation was also due to attend the hearing with the Minister.

One day ahead of this week's hearing, we were informed by the Minister's office that, once again, he would be unable to attend and that officials may not attend the hearing in his absence. The justification offered was that, while the Minister had retained the Civil Society portfolio in the new Government, the Office of Civil Society and Innovation was being relocated from the Cabinet Office to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. The Committee was advised that the Minister saw his first priority as helping to oversee the transfer of functions between departments. We were therefore obliged to cancel the hearing altogether.

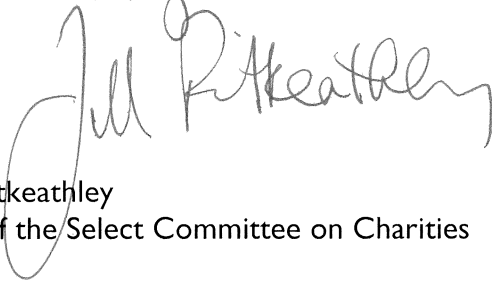
The Committee is extremely disappointed that, having required the rescheduling of the hearing at short notice to enable his personal attendance, the Minister has again withdrawn from the rescheduled session. This means that, at an important early stage in the inquiry, we have not had the benefit of hearing either from Government officials or from the responsible Minister on their objectives in relation to the charity sector. The relationship between the Government and the sector is an important line of inquiry for the Committee and we were

seeking early evidence from Government representatives in order to understand better the work they are doing. The absence of this evidence can only have a detrimental impact on our ability to investigate these issues. The short notice with which both sessions have been cancelled have also meant that we have not been able to hear from other witnesses, putting additional pressures on our inquiry's timetable and work programme.

While we recognise that the Minister and his portfolio are currently in the process of moving between departments and that this creates immediate challenges, we would observe that his portfolio remains unchanged and so, therefore, should his capacity to speak to our Committee about it. The Committee recognises that some elements of Government policy may be subject to review, but this should not have prevented the Minister from being able to discuss the Government's past record and the challenges he has faced in supporting the civil society agenda to date. We have seen no evidence that the changes to the machinery of government at the Office for Civil Society and Innovation are of such magnitude that they warranted the enforced absence of the Minister from our short evidence session.

The Committee started its inquiry with a desire to take a positive, collaborative approach with everyone involved with the charitable sector. This has been a frustrating state of affairs, but as the Committee proceeds with its work, we will continue to seek a constructive relationship with Government. Mindful of the accountability principle of public life, we would be grateful if the Minister could be reminded that he should continue to treat accountability to Parliament as his first priority even at a time of transition, and that he should avoid creating the impression of obstructing reasonable scrutiny as regrettably appears to have been the case in this instance.

I would like to add that throughout this episode, the staff of your office have been of great help in trying to reach an amicable decision, which is much appreciated.

Kind regards


Baroness Pitkeathley
Chairman of the Select Committee on Charities

cc: Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport
Lord Laming, Chairman of Committees