

## Written evidence submitted by Bill Wiggins MP

Dear Chris,

As is traditional in the Chamber, let me begin by declaring my own interests as per the Register of Members Interests.

I have some reservations about commenting on the consultation in public as I mentioned to you before Christmas.

However I want to support your work and efforts to improve our system and hope that my comments will be useful.

The Code of Conduct consultation contains many useful and important improvements such as 'Safe Harbour'.

However, there are some fundamental issues which are not addressed and over which the Committee has therefore wrestled.

The first and most critical element is the principal of inquisition by the Commissioner.

This was the largest flaw in the report and fundamentally undermines the good, hard work put into it.

I believe that MPs should align themselves with their normal working constituents as much as possible.

Therefore, this method of inquisition is completely out of kilter with everyday life.

Until we resolve this, our Code of Conduct will not succeed in the way in which the committee intends.

The next stumbling block is the role of the Commissioner whose position as a guide to the Committee is a problem.

The comments and recommendations delivered to the Committee used to be given in secret and are not recorded.

Therefore, they are always going to be called into question.

This must end not least to build confidence in the neutrality and appearance of the Office of the Commissioner.

It seems unfair that the evidence is put into the public domain except the advice of the Commissioner to the Committee.

Please do consider adding this change into the updated Code of Conduct.

I believe that the Freedom of Information Act can be applied to the Registrar. If this is the case then asking for commercial personal contracts is not realistic, until this changes.

I agree that it would be helpful to have a legally approved letter explaining that paid advocacy is never acceptable and confirming that employers agree and understand this.

The initial report also tries to create behaviour that it approves of, thus making it part of a wider agenda that is difficult to support.

For example, the addition of "Respect" with regard to racism clearly is there with good intention however, it should not be included in a Code of Conduct.

Not least because "respect" is open to subjectivity. To avoid any sort of political advantage subjectivity should be avoided.

The 12 month limit on reward looks like trying to provide a "get out of jail free card " by extending it.

However making it more expensive ( by foregoing 12 instead of 6 months worth of payment) does not change that - so it is an unnecessary change and appears to be used as a punishment rather than being helpful.

The idea that Committee members will not be lobbied seems naïve and ignores the greater political advantages that this process creates, when linked to Recall.

This is a large and complex report with a complicated consultation process open to all sorts of suggestions.

The Consultation is significant document of some 121 pages. The complexity of the situation and the small window for comment suggests that new views are unlikely to be accepted and most MPs will not have time to contribute.

When we consider the consequences for MPs caught up in the process, we really need to get it right.

At all times the changes proposed should favour simplicity, this applies to topical questions or changes to the ministerial code and alignment with any other codes such as the House of Lords.

Complexity brings errors which then bring the House into disrepute - contrary to the codes purpose.

Limiting time or limiting income does not improve the honesty and integrity of the system - it just creates more opportunity for errors.

Prohibiting people from voting, prohibits them from acting in the interests of their constituents which would be counter to encouraging transparency.

Our system is designed to be transparent and to ensure that people can see how and why we vote a certain way, and they can challenge this if they disagree.

How would you decide which votes an MP was ineligible for?

I support all changes suggested to the appeals process but point out again that evidence obtained through inquisition is the fundamental problem so whichever new option is chosen, that evidence will always undermine some of the process.

Simplification is the best form of promotion.

More rules mean more training, and thus creates more opportunities to make a mistake.

I support and recognise that we need a system that stops abuse of our political processes.

The consequences of even the smallest transgression are public and humiliating both personally and politically.

Therefore, it is absolutely worth getting this right.

Sadly, this report and consultation I fear leads us in the opposite direction by creating greater complexity, more rules and increased subjectivity.

I hope that this can change.

Yours sincerely

Bill Wiggin MP

*05 January 2022*