



Rt Hon Caroline Nokes MP  
Chair  
House of Commons Women & Equalities Select Committee

BY EMAIL

3<sup>rd</sup> September 2021

*Dear Caroline*

**Women and Equalities Committee inquiries into the role of the Government Equalities Office; and reform of the Gender Recognition Act**

Many thanks for your letter dated 19<sup>th</sup> July relating to the above inquiries. I was sorry that the oral evidence session did not take place. I know you have written to a number of former Ministers for Women & Equalities so the answers below relate to my experience when I held the brief between April 2014 and July 2016.

In relation to reform of the GRA process my main concern was that the current process is too medicalised and often those seeking gender reassignment feel they must demonstrate a negative effect on their mental health in order to proceed, which can be very distressing. We felt at the time (and I still do) that the process was outdated and potentially discriminatory.

While I am sure the EHRC has an important role to play in facilitating open and constructive debate on many equalities matters I think when it comes to legislative change such as amending the GRA it is down to officials working in the Equality Hub under the leadership of the Ministers to bring stakeholders together. However, this is no doubt a contentious subject with many differing views, so the fact that views could not be reconciled should in no way reflect badly on Ministers or officials.

I do believe that the Cabinet office is the right place for GEO and the Equality Hub to sit on a permanent basis. When I held the brief, it made no sense that disability policy was not also covered by the Government Equalities Office. Having said that it is important that equalities issues in their broadest sense are not simply left to the Equality Hub and the Cabinet Office. For this reason, I remain sceptical about having a specific full-time equalities Minister at Cabinet level.

There has to be a balance struck between all Ministers and Departments recognising that they are all responsible, in some way, for advancing equality issues and one specific part of Government having overall responsibility for such issues. I feel very firmly that holding the brief alongside being Financial Secretary at the Treasury and then Education Secretary meant I was able to bring equality



considerations into broader cross Government policy decisions. But the post-holder must make the brief a personal priority and make sure that it is given sufficient weight in their meetings, policy discussions and other commitments by their Private Office and other departmental officials where relevant.

While Cabinet Committees have their place, I believe they are best utilised when there is a specific issue or legislative reform to be delivered – endless high-level discussions without conclusion simply results in frustration and absences by Ministers or their representatives. I also requested that my fellow Ministers with equality responsibilities in their portfolio (including the Home Office, DWP, MoD, Treasury and others) took part in Women & Equalities oral questions in the Commons. There is nothing like having to answer questions from fellow MPs to concentrate the mind but also to help Ministers hear what their fellow Ministers are working on and where there are opportunities for further cross Government collaboration.

Given that the Social Mobility Commission has moved to the Equality Hub I can quite see why the current Minister for Women & Equalities has sought to broaden out the Government's approach to equalities. Outside Government, when businesses and organisations are focusing on Diversity & Inclusion issues, there is an increasing focus on socio economic diversity and neuro diversity. The discussion around intersectionality is growing and modern equality policy must now reflect that too.

I hope the above is helpful and thank you for asking for views on these important topics.

With best wishes.

*Tony*

*Nicky*

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