

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee

House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA

Tel 020 7219 6120 website www.parliament.uk/cms

Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP
Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport
100 Parliament St, London SW1A 2BQ

20 February 2018

Dear Secretary of State,

Appointment of the Chair of the Charity Commission

The Committee held a pre-appointment hearing with the Government's preferred candidate for the Chair of the Charity Commission, Baroness Stowell, this morning. I am sorry to report that we cannot support the Government's nomination.

This is the first time that this Committee has not supported the Government's candidate, and it is not a decision that we have taken lightly. The Committee was unanimous in its view that, for four reasons, Baroness Stowell should not be appointed:

- i. Experience: Baroness Stowell has little more than 6 months of negligible charity sector experience, and a complete lack of experience of working for a regulatory body. According to the Government's Code on Public Appointments, individuals selected by Ministers for public appointments must possess the "skills, experiences and qualities [...] to meet the needs of the public body or statutory office in question." In addition to this, Baroness Stowell was unable to demonstrate to the Committee any real insight, knowledge or vision for the charities sector.
- ii. Neutrality: the candidate was a longstanding Government Minister less than two years ago. The fact that Baroness Stowell had a political career is not itself a bar, and the candidate has publicly committed to giving up the Conservative Whip upon appointment. However, her political past is a source of concern for the Committee and those within the charity sector. As the umbrella body for voluntary organisations, NCVO, told us in written evidence, "perceived independence – being seen to be independent – is just as important as actual independence. Charities cannot afford for their regulator to be anything other than beyond all suspicion."
- iii. The recruitment process: our concerns here are twofold:
 - a. The process has lacked transparency and has been protracted. A hearing was set up at your Department's behest for 12 December 2017. The

Committee clerk was told in a phone-call on 5 December that the announcement of the preferred candidate was imminent. However, the then Secretary of State, Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP, wrote to the Committee on 6 December informing us that the process “is taking slightly longer than we anticipated.” No further communication took place until mid-January. While we have been told that two other candidates were deemed appointable, we have not been given their names (despite Committee staff seeking this information.) **We would like to request this information again: ie. the names of the other appointable candidates, and why Baroness Stowell was chosen over them?**

- b. On 19 December, the Committee wrote to you explaining that we thought it regrettable that candidates for public roles of the kind we scrutinise apparently continue to be drawn from a narrow group of establishment figures. Baroness Stowell claimed to be a “veteran outsider” and yet she has been Leader of the House of Lords, Head of Corporate Affairs at the BBC, and Deputy Chief of Staff to the Leader of the Conservative Party. This does not strike us as the CV of an “outsider.”

- iv. Performance: Cabinet Office Guidance on Pre-Appointment Scrutiny stipulates that “The candidate will need to be able to withstand parliamentary and public scrutiny should they take up post and the Committee may wish to test this.” On this occasion, it is our judgment that Baroness Stowell was unable to withstand scrutiny. Members asked fair questions that gave the candidate the opportunity to demonstrate her knowledge, skills and experience. Indeed, several Members made proactive efforts to tease out relevant examples of her interest in, and vision for, the sector, and were disappointed to receive answers that were often lacking in detail or relevance.

Our full report, and reasoning, will follow. I hope you will take the Committee’s considerations into account.



DAMIAN COLLINS MP, CHAIR, DCMS COMMITTEE