



HOUSE OF LORDS

Report from the Commissioner for Standards

The conduct of Lord Bethell

Commissioners for Standards

The independent Commissioners for Standards are responsible for considering any alleged breaches of the Codes of Conduct.

Address: The Commissioners for Standards, House of Lords, London SW1A 0PW

Email: lordsstandards@parliament.uk

Telephone: 020 7219 7152

Website: www.parliament.uk/hl-standards

Registrar of Lords' Interests

The Registrar of Lords' Interests advises members of the House and their staff on their obligations under the Codes of Conduct.

Address: The Registrar of Lords' Interests, House of Lords, London SW1A 0PW

Email: lordsregistrar@parliament.uk

Telephone: 020 7219 3112/3120

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Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme helpline

Telephone: 0808 168 9281 (freephone)

Email: Support@ICGShelpline.org.uk

CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
Summary of complaint	3
Relevant aspect of the Code	3
Summary of investigation	4
Lord Bethell's evidence	4
Other evidence	6
Finding	8
Appendix 1: Letter from Anneliese Dodds MP to the Commissioner for Standards, 26 June 2021	10
Appendix 2: Email from the Commissioner for Standards to Lord Bethell, 28 June 2021	11
Appendix 3: Letter from Lord Bethell to the Commissioner for Standards, 28 June 2021	12
Appendix 4: Email from Lord Bethell to the Commissioner for Standards, 2 July 2021	13

The conduct of Lord Bethell

Summary of complaint

1. On 26 June 2021, my office received a complaint from Anneliese Dodds MP, Chair of the Labour Party, about the conduct of Lord Bethell, who at the date of the complaint was serving as Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Innovation at the Department of Health and Social Care (“DHSC”) (see Appendix 1).¹
2. Ms Dodds complained that Lord Bethell, according to media reporting, had sponsored a parliamentary pass for Ms Gina Coladangelo in her married name of Gina Tress, a former adviser to the Health Secretary, despite her allegedly playing “no role in Bethell’s team” and that the “DHSC was unable to explain why he had sponsored her pass”. She asked me to investigate whether Lord Bethell was in breach of the Code of Conduct for Members of the House of Lords (the “Code of Conduct”).

Relevant aspect of the Code

3. Paragraph 11(c) of the Code of Conduct states that members shall “act in accordance with any rules agreed by the House in respect of ... the facilities of the House.”
4. Paragraph 113 of the Guide to the Code of Conduct explains that a breach of “any rules agreed by the House in respect of ... the facilities of the House ... constitutes a breach of the Code of Conduct and could lead to an investigation by the House of Lords Commissioner for Standards.” At the time that Lord Bethell applied for Ms Coladangelo’s parliamentary pass, in February 2020,² the rules relating to parliamentary passes allowed for members of the House of Lords, irrespective of whether they were backbenchers or Ministers, to apply for passes for anyone who fell into one or more of the following closely defined categories:
 - (1) a member’s spouse or partner;
 - (2) secretaries and research assistants;
 - (3) carers; and
 - (4) a driver employed specifically to drive them.
5. With respect to the second category, the rules stated that passes for secretaries and research assistants would be issued only to people who “genuinely and personally provide[d] parliamentary secretarial or research assistance” to the sponsoring member, and members would be required to sign a declaration to this effect when applying for such a pass.

1 This investigation and report was completed by Akbar Khan.

2 The rules on sponsoring passes were changed in November 2020. See House of Lords Commission, *Rules relating to Parliamentary passes for Members’ Staff: follow-up report* (1st Report, Session, Session 2019-21, HL Paper 160) This report inserted a line to say that members could only sponsor passes under category 2 “if the absence of such a pass would make it impossible for the individual to support the member effectively.” The report allowed members a grace period until 31 March 2021 to cancel any passes which did not fall within the new guidelines. Lord Bethell cancelled Ms Coladangelo’s pass in December 2020, well within the grace period allowed.

6. It is worth noting that a parliamentary pass provides the holder with privileged access across the parliamentary estate, as well as the right to bring in guests, hold a parliamentary email address, access the Library and its services, use catering outlets and bars and have a desk (subject to provision by the Whips).³

Summary of investigation

7. Having established that Lord Bethell sponsored a pass for Ms Coladangelo under her married name of Gina Tress from March to December of 2020, I wrote to him on 28 June 2021 to ask for some further information before undertaking my preliminary assessment (see Appendix 2). I asked Lord Bethell:
 - When you applied for Ms Tress’ pass, did you sign a declaration to confirm that she would be genuinely and personally providing parliamentary secretarial or research assistance for you?
 - During the relevant period of the pass (March–December 2020), was Ms Tress providing parliamentary secretarial or research assistance to you in your Ministerial or non-Ministerial capacity?
8. Lord Bethell wrote to me on 28 June (see Appendix 3) and again on 2 July (see Appendix 4), explaining that Ms Coladangelo provided him with unpaid parliamentary research support during the period in question.
9. Having considered all the available information at that stage, I determined that this complaint passed preliminary assessment and that an investigation was required as there was sufficient evidence to establish a *prima facie* case of a breach of the Code of Conduct.
10. I wrote to Lord Bethell on 5 July to inform him I would be investigating the complaint and inviting him to interview.

Lord Bethell’s evidence

11. I interviewed Lord Bethell on 19 July via MS Teams, with Donna Davidson, Standards Clerk, attending.
12. Lord Bethell explained that Ms Coladangelo worked for him on an informal unpaid basis as his speaking engagements in the House of Lords started to increase after he was made a Whip in the autumn of 2019. He got to know her during Matt Hancock’s 2019 leadership campaign when she demonstrated her experience and skills in communications.
13. Lord Bethell told me that in terms of parliamentary research and engagement Ms Coladangelo was one of the most qualified people in the country with a long career in political analysis and communications. He said, “for someone in my position, that’s incredibly valuable because ... I went from a position of obscurity and not doing much public speaking and presentation to being very much in the front line”.
14. Once he found out that he was going to be made a Health Minister and with the pandemic encroaching, he said “getting Gina a pass made things better

3 House of Lords Commission, *Rules relating to Parliamentary passes for Members’ Staff: follow-up report* (1st Report, Session, Session 2019-21, HL Paper 160)

for me so that she could come in and we could meet, and she could come in and attend some of the things and give me pointers on how I came across.”

15. Lord Bethell told me that Ms Coladangelo assisted him with his social media, speaking style and personal presentation and that they spoke almost every day when the House of Lords was sitting. These meetings were conducted mostly over the phone and Zoom once the pandemic restrictions came into force.
16. Lord Bethell confirmed that he was not asked to sponsor Ms Coladangelo’s pass by anyone else and that he met with the Assistant Registrar of Lords’ Interests to discuss the job that she would be doing and to check that it would fall within the category of secretarial or research support. He told me he wanted to make sure there were “no conflicts” in his sponsoring her pass.
17. He said that he told the Assistant Registrar that she would be doing “personal presentation and image; speaker preparation; drafting tips and narrative themes; building parliamentary support; social media posting and positioning”. He said the Assistant Registrar advised him that the proposed role “was well within the realms of what was deemed suitable”.
18. I asked Lord Bethell about the support he received from his private office and civil servants in the DHSC. He told me that while they produced briefing and speaking notes for him, they did not advise him on his personal presentation. He said:

“As a Lords Minister, you are in a slightly tricky position because you are the most junior Minister in the department. So, we have five Ministers. I am by far the most junior ... My private office prepare my pack for me and will arrange a pre-brief. What they won’t do is turn that into ... prose of a kind that will work in the Chamber; I have to do that myself.”
19. I asked Lord Bethell if he had access to communications and press advisers to assist him in his presentational skills. He told me “No, they will do departmental communications but they won’t do any communications for me.” The “comms department look after departmental comms, but they will leave it to me to arrange the way in which I present myself”. He also explained that he did not have much access to special advisers.
20. Lord Bethell provided an example of the type of research support offered by Ms Coladangelo that was not available to him from DHSC officials. He told me:

“I am the person who has to translate the official handling of the Bill and what the Bill is trying to achieve with the political handling in the House of Lords. In things like this officials wouldn’t know or have met the peers. They can give you a profile ... and they can tell you what [the peer] has said in the past but they won’t ... have engaged with him. Someone like Gina has that ability to bridge between the policy objectives of the Bill because she has training and background in policy ... and also understands the personalities and the political dimension.”
21. I asked Lord Bethell if he thought DHSC officials should have helped him in the manner provided by Ms Coladangelo. He told me “It’s not what their skills are. It’s not even appropriate for them to be in that kind of work.”

Other evidence

22. Following my interview with Lord Bethell, I considered it would be appropriate to conduct three further interviews to verify the evidence that he gave.

Sir Chris Wormald

23. I interviewed Sir Chris Wormald, Permanent Secretary at the DHSC, on 3 August via MS Teams, with Donna Davidson, Standards Clerk, attending.
24. Sir Chris confirmed that Lord Bethell's support from the department did not extend to advice about his personal presentation and that the departmental officials were not able to provide tailored advice regarding dealing with individual members of the House and the questions they might ask the Minister.
25. I also asked Sir Chris to comment on the example of work undertaken by Ms Coladangelo as provided in Lord Bethell's evidence and whether civil servants would be able to offer a similar skillset to her. Sir Chris told me that civil servants are not particularly trained for the skillset that Ms Coladangelo offered Lord Bethell and that he thought Lord Bethell's comments that her skillset was not the classic Civil Service skill set was entirely true.
26. I also asked Sir Chris if he had observed Ms Coladangelo undertaking any of the activities mentioned by Lord Bethell. He told me he had not and "there's no reason why I should have done." However, he said he got to see Ms Coladangelo when she was a non-executive director of the DHSC appointed by the Secretary of State. He observed that she performed her role "extremely well" and brought a considerable amount of expertise on communications, amongst other professional areas. He thought she was an asset to the Board and the DHSC. He said based on his knowledge of her skillset it would not surprise him that she would also be good at supporting Lord Bethell in the areas he described.
27. Sir Chris also explained that Lord Bethell did not have any regular access to the special advisers: "if a Minister had a very, very tricky parliamentary or political issue with which they were dealing, they might get quite a lot of special adviser time in that week ... And then they might go for weeks and weeks without seeing any of them."

The Assistant Registrar of Lords' Interests

28. I interviewed the Assistant Registrar of Lords' Interests on 5 August via MS Teams, with Donna Davidson, Standards Clerk, attending.
29. The Assistant Registrar told me that he remembered meeting with Lord Bethell in early February 2020 to discuss applying for a pass for Ms Coladangelo. His memory was that she was also in attendance at that meeting.
30. The Assistant Registrar did not recall the details of their conversation but said that:

"It would have only been along the lines of what job she did, which she's filled out on the form you have got, and whether—She would obviously be working with him so he has, obviously, ticked the box to say "Genuinely and personally providing parliamentary secretary or

research assistance” to him. So, that for us, for our purposes, that is good enough for us to say, “Fine, No problem.””

31. When I asked the Assistant Registrar whether he considered that “personal presentation and image; speaker prep; drafting tips and narrative themes; building parliamentary support; social media posting and positioning” fell within the rules for sponsoring a pass, he told me:

“I think so. I mean, she’s providing parliamentary secretarial you could say or research assistance to them. The problem is that the description can be a very—can be taken as a very broad spectrum of things ... Because if you take a description of a secretary that would mean that she’s probably doing—or he or she would be doing—typing or answering the phone, but, of course, we have moved on. We don’t live in the 1980s anymore and now secretarial assistance can be—could be described as a range of things like she would have been doing for him. So, you know, gone are the days when she’s not doing typing, she’s not answering the phone. Well, she’s not doing secretarial work because that has changed, it’s moved on. We now live in a digital age. So, yes, I wouldn’t—if he asked me today, I would still have the same answer.”

32. I also asked the Assistant Registrar whether it was unusual for Ministers to sponsor parliamentary passes. He told me that the rules allow for Members to have up to three members of staff sponsored by them “so even if they became a Minister with a support office, if someone was providing a particular service to them, there is nothing to say that once you become a Minister you have to get rid of any staff you have who are providing you with that”.

Ms Gina Coladangelo

33. Finally, I interviewed Ms Gina Coladangelo (aka “Gina Tress”) in person on 25 August, with Connie Walsh, Assistant Standards Clerk, attending.
34. Ms Coladangelo corroborated all aspects of Lord Bethell’s testimony and said she first met Lord Bethell when they both worked to support the leadership campaign for Matt Hancock MP. She described the work she did for Lord Bethell from his time as a Whip as “help and advice, strategic counsel, and sort of what I would call top-level sort of, macro is too big a word, but discussion and advice on his own position and, career is too big a word, but his day-to-day activities”.
35. She explained that the nature and type of support she gave to Lord Bethell was not in her view part of the usual civil service function. For example, she would take a draft speech and discuss with Lord Bethell how best for him to position and project it given the objectives he wanted to achieve. Her advice was high level and strategic about how to craft the message to various audiences; it was not about the detail.
36. She explained in the beginning their engagement started in a gradual and organic way with Lord Bethell just seeking out her advice but as his political career evolved and developed from backbencher to Whip and then to a Lords Minister she talked to him more regularly. She was very much there as a source of advice and counsel on a *pro bono* basis. She told me the level of support she provided to Lord Bethell amounted to roughly an hour a day:

“I’d speak to him every day, but in terms of—you know, it would often be for—his diary would be planned, as many of these, as many leaders are, sort of, you know, very busy people within sort of five to 10-minute segments. So we would often speak for five minutes or 10 minutes, and then I might catch up with him again for another five minutes or another 10 minutes. So it probably amounted to in total, just us, face to face, you know, probably an hour a day.”

37. She said she had never had a conversation with the Permanent Secretary about the support she was providing to Lord Bethell and had no idea whether he was aware of it or not.
38. She explained how she came to apply for a pass:

“My recollection of when my pass came to be was as part of, as things started to get busier, I needed to be a bit more accessible, “Come in and see me for 10 or 15 minutes, help me out and go again”. But then of course I never came to need to use it very much because then the restrictions came into the House of Lords.”

Ms Coladangelo estimated that she used her pass a total of five or six times between March and December 2020 because of the ongoing restrictions due to Covid.

39. Ms Coladangelo confirmed that there was no one else involved in the decision for Lord Bethell to sponsor her pass but she did not recall meeting with the Assistant Registrar as he said.

Finding

40. **Lord Bethell sponsored a parliamentary pass for Ms Coladangelo from March 2020 to December 2020, during which time the requirement of the Code was that she genuinely and personally provided him with parliamentary secretarial or research support.**
41. **In investigating and adjudicating allegations of non-compliance with the Code, I am bound to act in accordance with the principles of natural justice. It is also a requirement that the civil standard of proof (balance of probabilities) is adopted by me in order to find the allegation proven against a member.**
42. **I have carefully reviewed the evidence gathered in this investigation relating to the complaint made by Anneliese Dodds MP. I am satisfied on the evidence, which is mostly uncontested, that the facts show Ms Coladangelo did work for Lord Bethell during the period of March to December 2020 and that the work she undertook for him properly falls into the category of research or secretarial support. I am also satisfied that the work she did was not assistance that was provided by Lord Bethell’s private office or civil servants in the DHSC.**
43. **Although recollections vary regarding the meeting with the Assistant Registrar of Lords’ Interests in February 2020 and who was present, I do not believe this was because of any attempt to mislead me or my investigation. I consider that whether Ms Coladangelo was present or not at the meeting is not a material consideration that is sufficiently important to affect my findings in this case.**

44. **I conclude that Lord Bethell is not in breach of paragraph 11(c) of the Code of Conduct. The complaint is therefore dismissed.**
45. I am grateful to Lord Bethell, Sir Chris Wormald, the Assistant Registrar of Lords' Interests, and Ms Coladangelo for their full cooperation and time given in this matter especially during the parliamentary summer recess.

Akbar Khan
Commissioner for Standards

APPENDIX 1: LETTER FROM ANNELIESE DODDS MP TO THE COMMISSIONER FOR STANDARDS, 26 JUNE 2021

You may be aware of recent media reports into the connection between the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and Gina Coladangelo, a non-executive director at the Department of Health and Social Care and former advisor to the Health Secretary.

On 22 November 2020, *The Sunday Times* reported that Ms Coladangelo holds a security pass to the Palace of Westminster sponsored by Lord Bethell of Romford, who also serves as Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Innovation at the Department of Health and Social Care. Archived pages of the Members Register of Interests confirm this to be the case. According to that report, Ms Coladangelo plays no role in Bethell's team and the DHSC was unable to explain why he had sponsored her pass.

The "Rules governing the use of facilities in the House of Lords" state that members may only apply for passes for people who fall into one or more of the following categories:

- (1) A member's spouse or partner
- (2) Secretaries and research assistants
- (3) Carers
- (4) A driver employer specifically to drive them

Members cannot sponsor a pass for anyone who does not fall into one or more of these categories.

With respect to the second category, the rules state that passes for secretaries and research assistants may be issued only to people who "genuinely and personally provide parliamentary secretarial or research assistance" to the sponsoring member, and members must sign a declaration to this effect when applying for such a pass. A breach of this rule is a breach of the Code of Conduct and can be investigated by the Commissioner for Standards.

In light of these developments, can I ask that you urgently:

- Investigate the circumstances under which Ms Coladangelo was issued a security pass granting her access to the Palace of Westminster.
- Confirm that Lord Bethell signed a declaration to confirm that Ms Coladangelo would be genuinely and personally providing secretarial or research assistance to his duties as a Member of the House of Lords.
- Clarify whether there has been a breach in the Code of Conduct surrounding the issuance of the security pass for Ms Coladangelo, and if so, explain what actions you intend to take against her and Lord Bethell.

The security of Parliament is paramount. It is critical that the rules governing who is granted unfettered access to the parliamentary estate are applied correctly. I am sure you will understand the need for urgent action to understand if that is what happened in this particular case.

I will be publishing this letter in the public interest.

APPENDIX 2: EMAIL FROM THE COMMISSIONER FOR STANDARDS TO LORD BETHELL, 28 JUNE 2021

I have received a complaint about you from Ms. Anneliese Dodds, the Chair of the Labour Party in relation to a pass you sponsored for Ms Gina Tress from March to December of last year. I have attached the complaint to this email.

The Code of Conduct for Members of the House of Lords (‘the Code’) requires me to conduct a preliminary assessment of all complaints to ascertain whether there might have been a potential breach of the Code and therefore whether there is something for me to investigate. Before I can conduct my preliminary assessment of this case, it would be helpful if you could provide me with the following information:

- When you applied for Ms Tress’ pass, did you sign a declaration to confirm that she would be genuinely and personally providing parliamentary secretarial or research assistance for you?
- During the relevant period of the pass (March–December 2020), was Ms Tress providing parliamentary secretarial or research assistance to you in your Ministerial or non-Ministerial capacity?

Given the public nature of this complaint and the fact that it has already been publicised widely in the press, I would be grateful if you could respond to me by Friday 2 July at the latest.

**APPENDIX 3: LETTER FROM LORD BETHELL TO THE
COMMISSIONER FOR STANDARDS, 28 JUNE 2021**

I understand from press reports that there is a complaint expected from the Labour Party on my sponsorship of passes so I thought I would write to reassure you of the facts of the situation.

Gina Coladangelo provided me with unpaid parliamentary research support, helping me to draft speeches, engaging with stakeholders and assisting with my communications. Having sought the advice of the Assistant Registrar of Lords Interests, I applied for a House of Lords pass which was granted on or around 12th March 2020 in the name of “Gina Tress”.

I recognise that in November 2020 the “Rules relating to Parliamentary passes for Members’ Staff” were changed. I wrote to the pass office on December 2nd 2020 to cancel the pass and received confirmation on December 4th 2020.

I am very happy to answer any further questions and can be contacted on my parliamentary email.

APPENDIX 4: EMAIL FROM LORD BETHELL TO THE COMMISSIONER FOR STANDARDS, 2 JULY 2021

Thank you very much for you note. You should have received my initial response to the complaint which I sent on Monday. I wonder if you could confirm this point. In reply to your questions:-

1. Although I do not have a copy of the declaration to hand, I assume that I did sign a declaration to confirm that she would be genuinely and personally providing parliamentary secretarial or research assistance for [me]. I have written to [the Assistant Registrar of Lords' Interests] to confirm this point and I will forward his reply.
2. Ms Tress provided me with research and support during the period before March 2020 on a regular basis. This had included editing speeches on my key causes, advice on personal presentation, counsel on building an effective network in Parliament and supporting my political causes, helping me retain contact with my remaining interests, including the performing arts, counter-extremism and medical research. I began the process of arranging a pass at the beginning of 2020, although it took some time for the pass to be issued in March 2020. On March 8th I was unexpectedly created a Minister in the Department for Health and Social Affairs and I was immediately plunged into the priorities of pandemic response. During this period, Ms Tress provided parliamentary support during a period when I spoke in parliament hundreds of times and continued to lean on political networks to achieve my parliamentary objectives. However, on March 16th restrictions on pass-holders began and on 15th April 2020 visitor access to the parliamentary estate was restricted and parliamentary pass holders, including MPs and peers, were encouraged to "work from home where possible". So, since there was no prospect of the return to normal parliamentary access, I decided to cancel the pass in December.