

Rt Hon Margaret Hodge MP: Resolution letter

Letter to Mr Paul Rush from the Commissioner, 31 March 2011

I have now concluded my consideration of the complaint which you sent me on 14 February about the use made by Rt Hon Margaret Hodge MP of House of Commons stationery and pre-paid envelopes to write on party political matters.

In essence, your complaint was that Mrs Hodge had used House of Commons provided stationery and House of Commons pre-paid envelopes to send letters which constituted party political activity, contrary to the rules of the House.

I have consulted Mrs Hodge and the House of Commons authorities about this matter.

Mrs Hodge has immediately accepted that House of Commons letter paper and House of Commons pre-paid envelopes should not have been used for this dispatch. She has told me that this was “*a terrible mistake in my office for which I must take responsibility*”. She has told me that she agreed to hold a reception in the House of Commons for members of her constituency party and they provided her with the letter which was sent to you. Since the letter included information about the reception being held in the House of Commons, it was mistakenly printed on House of Commons-provided stationery by volunteers and dispatched by volunteers, using House of Commons pre-paid envelopes. Mrs Hodge’s office manager failed to spot this. No paid staff time was used for this work, and the freepost address used in the letter was wholly funded by the constituency party.

Mrs Hodge tells me that she believes a total of 345 letters were sent out. She has confirmed that no other letters like this have been sent out in the course of the current Parliament.

Mrs Hodge has fully accepted that she was in breach of the rules of the House in allowing House of Commons stationery to be used for this dispatch. This is because it related to party political activity. Mrs Hodge has paid the full costs involved (£133.72). She has taken steps to avoid any recurrence by reminding staff and briefing volunteers about the proper use of House of Commons stationery.

I consider this a satisfactory response. Mrs Hodge has taken the appropriate action to rectify the mistake. I now, therefore, regard the matter as closed. I will report the outcome to the Committee on Standards and Privileges.

This letter, together with the evidence provided during the course of this inquiry, will shortly be published on my House of Commons webpages.

I am copying this letter to the Rt Hon Margaret Hodge MP.

31 March 2011

Rt Hon Margaret Hodge MP: Written evidence

1. Letter to the Commissioner from Mr Paul Rush, 14 February 2011

Following a recent telephone call to your office when I was given the procedure for making a complaint about an MP, I am now writing to you to lodge a Formal Complaint against the MP for Barking Margaret Hodge.

Up until the summer of last year I was a member of the Labour Party, but, for my own personal reasons I resigned my membership.

I was then very surprised in January to receive a letter from Margaret Hodge MP as a member of the Party. This letter was to tell me what activities would be going on in the Party over the next few months and inviting me to join in.

Why I am writing to you to complain, and what has made me so very angry is that as a tax paying pensioner, and along with many others in this country "*breathing through the pain*" of price rises and cuts, is the fact that Margaret Hodge MP has sent these letters out to members of her political party on House of Commons headed note paper, and also these letters have gone through the House of Commons post system.

Up until I left the party I was aware that there were in excess of 400 members in the local party, so the cost of all of this would be borne by me the taxpayer instead of her political party. This I believe is wrong. This is not the first time that I am aware of, but, now with us all having to watch what we spend, I believe I am right in making this complaint.

I enclose the original correspondence and the original envelope.

Of course Sir, if you come back to me and state that I am wrong in my complaint I will have to accept your decision, but, that will make me no less angry.

I await your response.

14 February 2011

2. Letter to Labour Party members from Rt Hon Margaret Hodge MP, 11 January 2011

Dear Member,

I would like to take this opportunity to wish you a Happy New Year. I would also like to inform you of what is coming up in the New Year.

An evening with Neil Kinnock (with fish n chip OR chicken n chip supper provided) Thursday 3 February 2011

Many of you will know (and love) Neil Kinnock who was Leader of the Labour Party until 1992. He has offered to come and speak to us to share his knowledge and wisdom on Thursday 3 February from 7.30pm onwards at [...] (formerly [...]) on the junction of [...]. Tickets are £10 a head or £20 (if you would like to join Neil's table).

Please make cheques payable to "Barking CLP Fighting Fund" and post to: An Evening with Neil Kinnock, [address].

Reception for members in the House of Commons — Wednesday 9 February 2011

I am holding a Reception in the House of Commons on Wednesday 9 February 2011 7pm-9pm in the Jubilee Room (off Westminster Hall). Nearest tube station is Westminster. Entrance is via St Stephens Entrance where you will be shown through security. Please let me know if you would like to attend. I need to have an idea about the number of people who will be attending. I would really like to see you.

Door knocking & leaflet delivering — please join in

We are continuing to hold our team door knocking sessions every fortnight in 2011. They take place at [time] on Saturday mornings. Please get in touch at the time if you would like to know where we are meeting. Knocking on doors as a team is great fun and it is vital to the work we do to engage with local residents and take up issues on their behalf. We are also planning leaflets across the constituency.

Dates for Team door knocking sessions

January: Abbey (15th) & Parsloes (29th)

February: (Longbridge (12th) & Eastbury (26th)

March: Becontree (12th) & Alibon (26th)

April: [location and date] & [location and date]

May: [location and date] & [location and date]

June: [location and date] & [location and date]

Door-knocking does take place outside of these dates. If you would like more information please contact [name] on [telephone number].

Helping with delivery

We will be delivering leaflets to each ward in the following months:

February: Alibon & Mayesbrook

March: Goresbrook, Gascoigne & Thames

April: [location]

May: [location]

Please get in touch if you would like to help.

11 January 2011

3. Form sent to Labour Party members by Rt Hon Margaret Hodge MP

PLEASE RETURN THIS TO OUR FREEPOST ADDRESS

NAME:

ADDRESS:

POST CODE:

TEL:

EMAIL:

Please tick the following boxes:

I would like to attend "An Evening with Neil Kinnock" on Thursday 3 February.

I enclose a cheque for £.....for.....people

1) I would like to order fish and chips

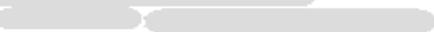
2) I would like to order chicken and chips

I would like to attend a reception for new members in the House of Commons on 9 February 2011 (free of charge)

I am interested in joining the fortnightly Saturday door knocking team. Please contact me with more information

Rt Hon Margaret Hodge MP

Tel: 

Fax: 

11 January 2011

4. Letter to Rt Hon Margaret Hodge MP from the Commissioner, 16 February 2011

I would welcome your help on a complaint which I have received from Mr Paul Rush about your use of House stationery and pre-paid envelopes apparently to communicate with members of your Constituency Party.

I attach the complainant's letter to me of 14 February, together with copies of your letter to him of 11 January 2011, its enclosure and the House of Commons second-class pre-paid envelope in which he says it was sent.

In essence, the complaint is that you have used House of Commons provided stationery and House of Commons pre-paid envelopes to send letters which constituted party political activity, contrary to the rules of the House.

The Code of Conduct for Members of Parliament provides in paragraph 14 as follows:

“Members shall at all times ensure that their use of expenses, allowances, facilities and services provided from the public purse is strictly in accordance with the rules laid down on these matters, and that they observe any limits placed by the House on the use of such expenses, allowances, facilities and services.”

The rules in relation to Members’ use of House stationery are set out in the Green Book last revised in July 2009. Section 1 of that Green Book sets out the fundamental principles relating to those allowances, including the following:

- *“Claims should be above reproach and must reflect actual usage of the resources being claimed.*
- *Claims must only be made for expenditure that it was necessary for a Member to incur to ensure that he or she could properly perform his or her parliamentary duties.*
- *Allowances are reimbursed only for the purpose of a Member carrying out his or her parliamentary duties. Claims cannot relate to party political activity of any sort, nor must any claim provide a benefit to a party political organisation.*

...

- *Individual Members take personal responsibility for all expenses incurred, for making claims and for keeping records, even if the administration of claims is delegated by them to others.”*

The rules in relation to House stationery and postage are set out in section 2.6 of the Green Book. The purpose of the facility is set out in paragraph 2.6.1 as follows:

“A cash-limited provision of House stationery and pre-paid envelopes is made available to Members for their parliamentary duties.”

Paragraph 2.6.3.1 includes the following on the use of pre-paid envelopes:

- *“Pre-paid envelopes are designed to enable you to reply to letters or other contacts you receive, and to write to individuals and organisations in pursuit of your parliamentary duties. They should not be used to send mail to people on issues on which they have not previously contacted you. You can use stationery and pre-paid envelopes to respond to contacts you have received through any medium.*

...

Pre-paid envelopes must not be used:

- *...in connection with fund raising for the benefit of a political party or supporting the return of any person to public office.”*

Paragraph 2.6.3.2 sets out provisions for House stationery which includes the following:

“House stationery, however it is acquired, should not be used for the following purposes:

...

- *in connection with fund raising for the benefit of a political party, advocating membership of a political party, or supporting the return of any person to public office .”*

I would welcome your help on this complaint in the light of this summary of the rules. In particular, it would be helpful to know:

1. the circumstances in which you came to write to the complainant with your letter of 11 January 2011;
2. whether you sent the same letter and enclosure to others and, if so, how many and who they were (in other words, how did you select the recipients of your letter?);
3. how many of these letters were sent in House of Commons second-class pre-paid envelopes and how many, if any, were dispatched or delivered by other means;
4. whether the stationery you used was House of Commons provided stationery, or whether you purchased it from the suppliers, and if so the source of the funding;
5. how the freepost address you gave was funded;
6. how many dispatches comprising how many letters you have sent in the course of the current Parliament to members of your constituency party using House of Commons provided stationery and House of Commons pre-paid envelopes;
7. whether you consider that this dispatch (and any others) breached the rules by its use of provided stationery and pre-paid envelopes and, if so, how this error came about.

Any other points you wish to make to help me with this inquiry would, of course, be very welcome.

I enclose a note which sets out the procedure which I follow. I have written to the complainant to let him know that I have accepted his complaint and that I am writing to you about it. In accordance with the decision of the House, I will be publishing on my website in due course the fact that I am conducting this inquiry and the general category in which it comes. I will not be commenting further on its progress.

I would be very grateful if you could let me have a response to this letter within the next three weeks. If there is any difficulty about this, or you would like a word about the process, please contact me here at the House.

I would be very grateful for your help on this matter.

16 February 2011

5. Letter to the Commissioner from Rt Hon Margaret Hodge MP, 28 February 2011

Thank you for your letter of 16 February. I am most grateful to you for bringing this to my attention.

This is a matter about which I was completely unaware until I received your letter. I have conducted an investigation within my office and am in a position to report back to you.

I would like to start with a sincere apology. There has been a terrible mistake in my office for which I must take responsibility. I will, of course reimburse all monies wrongly used.

The background is that I agreed to host a reception in the House of Commons for members of my constituency party. I collaborated with them and they provided a letter about a fund raising event (being held on 3 February), and a timetable for door knocking and leaflet delivery activity to be included with my invitation. The freepost address is owned and wholly funded by them and is not connected with my office.

They liaised with my office manager over the arrangements for attending the House for the reception on 9 February.

The beginning of January was a very busy period. The office had been closed over the Christmas break and there was a great deal of correspondence which required urgent attention.

As the letter in question included information about the reception in the House of Commons it was mistakenly printed on my headed paper. This work was carried out by volunteers. Quite mistakenly my office

manager failed to realise that it had been despatched by the volunteers, using pre-paid stationery. He has apologised to me for this and regrets the fact that it happened. No paid staff time was used.

I would of course like to reimburse and meet in full the cost of the stationery used to distribute this letter.

I have taken steps to deal with this matter and ensure there is no repeat by reminding all my staff and briefing volunteers about the proper use of House of Commons stationery.

You have asked and I can confirm that no other letters of this nature have been despatched in the course of the current Parliament.

My office manager advises me that in total 345 letters would have been sent. Based on the rates that I purchased the stationery at the time, I have calculated that the cost of the letters, envelopes and postage including VAT comes to £138.88.

This includes:

£14.40 for headed paper (@ £8.88 for 250 plus VAT)

£9.08 for pre-paid second class manila envelopes (@ £5.60 plus VAT) £110.40 for postage (80p per 250)

£5 for cost of printing (estimated)

I am sending a cheque for £138.88 made payable to [....].

I can only apologise again for the mistake which occurred in my office and assure you that I have taken all the steps I can to prevent this misuse of public funds occurring again.

28 February 2011

6. Letter to Rt Hon Margaret Hodge MP from the Commissioner, 7 March 2011

Thank you for your letter of 28 February, which I received on 7 March, responding to mine of 16 February about this complaint.

I was most grateful for this response and for the explanation you have provided. I hope I am right in assuming from your response that all 345 letters were to members of the constituency party; that House of Commons provided stationery was used for this dispatch (and not stationery procured by you from the suppliers); and that all 345 letters were sent out in House of Commons pre-paid second-class envelopes. If any of these assumptions is wrong, please let me know straightaway.

I am now consulting the Department of Resources for any comment they may wish to make and to confirm your calculations of the required repayment, which I see you have already sent. Once I have their response, I hope that it will be possible to bring this matter to a speedy conclusion. I am most grateful for your help.

7 March 2011

7. Letter to the Director-General of Resources from the Commissioner, 7 March 2011

I would welcome your help on a complaint which I have received against Rt Hon Margaret Hodge MP in respect of her use of House of Commons pre-paid envelopes and House of Commons stationery for party political activity.

In essence, the complaint is that Mrs Hodge has used House of Commons provided stationery and House of Commons pre-paid envelopes to send letters which constituted party political activity, contrary to the rules of the House.

I attach the relevant correspondence.

As you will see, Mrs Hodge has readily accepted that she was in breach of the rules of the House in respect of this dispatch, she has apologised, she has taken action to avoid a recurrence; she has calculated the cost of the stationery, printing and postage at £138.88; and she has sent a cheque for that amount to the House authorities.

I would be very grateful for any comments you may wish to make on this matter and, in particular, for confirmation of the costs of this dispatch namely 345 House of Commons second-class pre-paid envelopes and 345 sheets of House of Commons provided stationery, plus the printing cost which Mrs Hodge estimates to have been £5.

It would be most helpful if you could let me have a response to this letter in the next two weeks so that I can, if possible, bring this matter to an early conclusion. Thank you for your help.

7 March 2011

8. Letter to the Commissioner from Rt Hon Margaret Hodge MP, 9 March 2011

Thank you for your letter of 7 March.

I can confirm that the letters were despatched in error to members of my constituency party using pre-paid second class envelopes. For the avoidance of any doubt, I have assumed that House of Commons provided stationery was used, and not stationery I had purchased.

9 March 2011

9. Letter to the Commissioner from the Director-General of Resources, 23 March 2011

Thank you for your letters of 7 and 14 March¹ about Mr Rush's complaint.

I note that Mrs Hodge has accepted that an administrative error occurred within her office which meant that inappropriate material was sent to constituents using prepaid envelopes and stationery. I can confirm that the correspondence did not conform to the guidance which states that House stationery should not be used:

"in connection with fund raising for the benefit of a political party, advocating membership of a political party, or supporting the return of any person to public office".

As for the amount that Mrs Hodge has decided to refund, we have calculated an amount due of £128.72, based on costs provided by the Department of Facilities. On this basis, we have not yet processed the cheque for £138.88 submitted by Mrs Hodge and will wait to hear from you before doing so.

23 March 2011

10. Letter to Rt Hon Margaret Hodge MP from the Commissioner, 24 March 2011

I wrote to you on 7 March to let you know that I was consulting the Department of Resources about this complaint in respect of your use of House of Commons stationery, following your letter to me of 28 February. I subsequently sent them on 14 March a copy of your further letter of 9 March.

¹ Not included in the evidence.

I have now heard back from the Department. I enclose the relevant correspondence, including their letter to me of 23 March.

As you will see, the Department confirmed your judgment that your use of House of Commons stationery and pre-paid envelopes for the letter you sent out dated 11 January was in breach of the rules of the House. They calculate, however, that the costs of the stationery you have told me you used (345 sheets of House of Commons provided letter paper and 345 second-class pre-paid envelopes) was £128.72.

I need now to decide how best to resolve this complaint. Since you have fully accepted that this dispatch was in breach of the rules, you have paid back the sums involved, you have taken action in your office to avoid a recurrence, and you have apologised, I consider that it would be right, if you agree, for me to resolve this matter through the use of the rectification procedure. This means that I would write to the complainant to let him know how the matter has been resolved and close the complaint on that basis. I would inform the Committee on Standards and Privileges of the outcome, but would not submit a memorandum to them for them to prepare their own report. In due course, my letter to the complainant and the evidence on which it is based would be published on my webpages.

I enclose an extract of the letter which, if you agree to this course of action, I would propose to send to the complainant. While the content is, of course, a matter for me, I would be grateful for any comments you may have on its factual accuracy.

In respect of the payment, you will see that the Department of Resources has not processed the cheque for £138.88 which you sent. I would be very grateful if you could get in touch as soon as possible with the office of the Director General of Resources to make the necessary arrangements to refund the amount which they calculate is due is due (£133.72, which is £128.72 for envelopes and stationery, plus £5 for printing). It would be helpful if you could confirm that you have done so when you write back to me.

If you could let me have a response to this letter within the next week, I would then, subject to your reply, write to the complainant and so close the complaint.

Thank you for your continued help on this matter.

24 March 2011

11. Letter to the Commissioner from Rt Hon Margaret Hodge MP, 30 March 2011

Thank you for your letter of 24 March about the complaint about my use of House of Commons stationery.

I'm happy for you to proceed in the way you suggest. I have contacted the Department of Resources directly and have now sent them a cheque for £133.72 to pay back the full amount owed.

Thank you for your help in resolving this matter so swiftly.

30 March 2011