

Sir Gus O'Donnell,
Cabinet Secretary,
Cabinet Office,
70 Whitehall,
London SW1A 2AS

13 April 2009

Dear Gus,

The e-mails sent by Damian McBride raise serious concerns about the operation of 10 Downing Street, and the degree to which the rules about the role of Special Advisers are being enforced.

Mr McBride was hardly a peripheral figure. He was personally appointed by the Prime Minister and directly responsible to him. He worked alongside the Minister for the Civil Service, Tom Watson, at the heart of the Prime Minister's office.

I am sure you will agree that this episode is of fundamental importance to the integrity of the conduct of government, which you have an important role in protecting.

This weekend's revelations have left many questions unanswered. I am writing to ask you to take action to provide answers to these as a matter of urgency.

In particular, I would be grateful if you could please answer the following questions:

1. Who was party to e-mail exchanges suggesting smear stories against Conservative MPs?
2. Who was aware of the proposal to set up the Red Rag website? Specifically, was the Prime Minister aware of the proposed website or the concept behind it?
3. Were any members of the media copied in to email exchanges, using the government e-mail system, proposing the setting up of the Red Rag website, or suggesting smears of the Conservative Party?
4. Was the use of the government e-mail system for exchanges about the Red Flag website or smear stories against the Conservative Party in breach of the Ministerial Code, the Code of Conduct for Special Advisers

or any other relevant guidelines?

5. In the case of Mr McBride, can you confirm that his actions were in breach of the Code of Conduct for Special Advisers?

6. Can you confirm that Mr McBride is no longer paid by the taxpayer, and that he will not receive any severance pay?

7. In the case of Mr Tom Watson, who is both Minister for the Civil Service and Minister for Digital Engagement, did he have any knowledge of or involvement in the Red Rag website? Are you satisfied that he has complied fully with the Ministerial Code, given that he was referred to in one of the e-mails published yesterday? What action have you taken to assure yourself that this is the case?

8. What action are you taking to find out if the e-mails sent by Damian McBride are part of a broader pattern of activity by other Special Advisers, and if there are similar initiatives involving either officials in Downing Street or Ministers or Special Advisers elsewhere in the Government?

As I am sure you are aware, this affair raises broader concerns about the degree to which a government which has been in office for twelve years thinks it can simply ignore the rules, and the extent to which the Code of Conduct for Special Advisers - as well as the Ministerial Code - are being properly upheld. These concerns will only grow as we approach the forthcoming General Election. I would therefore be grateful to know what action you are taking to ensure that the relevant codes are being rigorously enforced, and to reassure both the Conservative Party - and the other opposition parties - that there neither are nor will be any similar initiatives from within the British Government, either now or in the future.

Given the public interest in this matter, I am releasing this letter to the Press.

The Rt Hon Francis Maude MP
Shadow Minister for the Cabinet Office