

Independent Review Panel - Financial Support for Members IRP - 15

Response from Cliff, Alan

Chris Reading: Independent Review Panel

Dear Mr Reading

I am submitting evidence as requested by the Chairman of the Independent Review Panel concerning "value for money" from Assembly members and their officers.

The following is the reply to a concern my wife and I expressed to our regional Welsh Assembly member, Janet Ryder, which she forwarded to the Presiding officer of the Assembly. You will find the original e-mail we sent in the latter part of this e-mail. Our objection was that two AMs, Peter Black and Lorraine Barrett, both Commissioners, broke several Assembly rules when they arranged for a room for a "by invitation only" poetry reading by the poet Patrick Jones on December 11th. Mr Jones is controversial as he attacks Christianity and rakes up some ancient Gnostic heresies about Jesus and Mary Magdalene. We knew he was controversial from reports we had read. Does not worry us too much as we have heard it all before. Imagine our surprise when the Commissioner who replied, rejecting our concerns that Assembly rules for room use had been broken, was Peter Black, in effect being judge and jury in his own case. Moreover we were totally taken aback when he accused us of belonging to Christian Voice which we only vaguely know about. We are not and never have been members or supporters. Mr Black also accuses us of being Islamophobic and being theocrats, views which we do not hold. More sinister was when he chastises our AM, as you will see, for listening to us and forwarding our concerns. Even if we had been all the things Mr Black implies our AM was bound to forward our concerns. The government of Wales is a representative democracy.

My reasons for stating that certainly in this incident the tax payer did not receive "value for money" are as follows:-

Firstly that Commissioner Black AM was not the person to reply to our concerns as that in effect made him judge in his own cause. The Commissioners are ultimately responsible for the rules governing room use at the Assembly. This is clearly a weakness in the rules governing the Assembly working. This ought to be corrected before salaries are raised.

Secondly, Commissioner Peter Black AM had no right to attribute beliefs to us that we do not hold and so endeavour to humiliate us. Here is an Assembly officer not checking his facts and lacking courtesy. Not an advertisement for representative democracy and a good reason for saying taxpayers are not getting value for money..

Thirdly Commissioner Black had no right to criticise our AM for carrying out her duties or imply that we should not have contacted our AM. In a representative democracy the representatives must be able to express the views of constituents without fear. Moreover the constituents must be free to express concerns without being belittled. I do not pay taxes to be insulted.

Fourthly I believe it was an error to allow this event to go ahead. The Presiding Officer of the Assembly sent a courteous e-mail via the Assembly Clerk informing my wife and me that as no rules were broken the event could not be stopped. We respect his judgement but disagree for the following reasons.

The main argument for holding the event was that the poet Patrick Jones had had an invitation to give a poetry reading at Waterstones bookshop Cardiff withdrawn due to a possible protest by Christian Voice. This the AMs concerned was a denial of free speech. However on the very same day as the reading in the Assembly the poet went on to give a further reading at the premises of a commercial competitor of Waterstones namely Border Books Cardiff. Further when interviewed on BBC TV Wales during December 11th the BBC representative challenged the poet with the accusation that the whole exercise was a publicity stunt. Mr Jones admitted that there were commercial spin offs, though he doubted it would pay his mortgage! I do not think the Assembly should be involved in a matter like this which looks like a "turf war" between bookshops rather than a denial of free speech. Waterstones presumably judged that the publicity would lose them trade. Border Books took a different attitude. In fairness many AMs took the view that the poetry reading was inappropriate but were apparently powerless to stop the event. That seems most disturbing. It cannot be right that Assembly Commissioners are judges of Assembly rules when they themselves are accused of breaking same.

This whole episode did not do credit to the Assembly body. To my mind serious weaknesses were exposed. I submit therefore that in this case "good value for money" was not received by the taxpayer.

I have to say that it is with regret I send this e-mail as my constituency AM and my North Wales regional AMs have always been entirely professional.

Yours sincerely

Alan Cliff