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Cathy Mason
Chairperson
Committee for Standards and Privileges
Parliament Buildings
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7th August 2025

Dear Chair and Committee Members

In a letter dated 21 July 2025 the Committee invited my views on Mr Gaston's representations to them concerning aspects of my report (202400045).

It is evident from his response to the Committee that Mr Gaston is not content or in agreement with the conclusions I have reached. This is not an uncommon occurrence when a member is found in breach of the Code, and I fully respect Mr Gaston's right to disagree with my conclusions.

However, Mr Gaston's representations in his letter to the Committee go beyond a simple disagreement with my conclusions; they include assertions that call into question the robustness of my investigation and analysis. I must firmly reject these claims. The allegations that I misrepresented, omitted context, or distorted the content of Mr Gaston's response to my findings of fact are entirely unfounded and without merit.

As is standard process, Mr Gaston was advised in my letter dated 19 May 2025 that he may challenge any of the findings of fact and submit supporting evidence within the required time period. The Commissioner must consider any challenges and can make changes to the findings of fact should she believe there is evidence to support the challenge. Mr Gaston did not challenge my findings of fact. He stated in his letter to me:

“Further to your letter of 19 May (Case reference number 202500045), while I do not dispute any of the findings of fact, I would respectfully observe that if MLAs are to be strictly limited to asking questions solely within the departmental remit of Ministers, this would preclude any scrutiny of Ministers on matters that may call their fitness for office into question. In doing so, Stormont would become a unique chamber within the United Kingdom.”

Mr Gaston instead offered his opinion on the broader issues raised by the complaint. At this stage in the process, I am not obliged to respond to commentary or political views on the merits of the complaint itself, only to challenges to my findings of fact.

Thank you for providing the opportunity of reply.

Yours sincerely

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Melissa McCullough
Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards