

Statement from Judith Ost ref Cllr Robbie Robertson.

The following account relates to the time when I was Newhaven Town Council leader and Cllr Robbie Robertson was mayor. From the website I have the dates 2005/6. I think Robbie was only mayor once.

The first I knew about any connection between Cllr Robertson and China was when the then Clerk rang me one day to find out if I knew anything about Cllr Robertson and anything Chinese.

The Clerk had been contacted, I think by the UK authorities, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as far as I recall, with a query about a letter of endorsement of a visa application by some Chinese citizens wanting to visit the UK on business written on Town council headed paper.

I saw the letter (which I guess was a copy forwarded by the Foreign Office to the Clerk). It appeared to be a genuine letterhead of the Town Council and Robbie had signed in his capacity as Mayor. I don't recall whether we had at that time moved from a fairly simple black and white letterhead incorporating the town logo or whether we had by then moved on to a full colour one which would have been harder to spoof. It looked the genuine article and indeed Cllr Robertson at no point denied writing or signing it.

The content of the letter was somewhat difficult to follow but clear in its intent to endorse visa applications for some Chinese nationals to visit the UK on some kind of business.

It was made clear to Cllr Robertson that he did not have the authority to use headed notepaper in his capacity as mayor, or to issue invitations or endorse visa applications and that all Mayoral correspondence should be cleared with the Clerk. I do not recall whether the Clerk and I did this jointly or separately.

At some point district councillor Ann De Vecchi (then Lewes District Council leader) and I had a conversation with Cllr Robertson away from council premises with a view to getting him to complete his declaration of interests and hospitality received with respect to a visit or visits to China which included the wearing of the mayoral chain in China which had occurred without any knowledge of anyone else at either Newhaven Town or Lewes District Councils. On this side of the exchange visits to the Fort and University were mentioned.

I forget if the above meeting was before or after the District Council's then Chief Executive had a similar phone call about similar misuse of District council headed paper. I know that he too had an interview with Cllr Robertson. I am sure that the Clerk and the Chief Executive would have conversed on the matter but don't have details.

The Town Council took no further action. The matter was in the hands of the authority that supports town and parish councils with standards matters.

When we met Cllr Robertson Ann and I tried hard to get from him what this was all about. He thought he was doing useful international collaboration but the detail about who he was meeting and what they were doing was impossible to understand.

Because we were trying to get him to complete the declaration of interests and hospitality received we tried to find out who he had been meeting, where he had been staying, who had paid for it how he had booked air travel, when and with which airline he had travelled etc. We could elicit no names, “the big hotel” that “they” book for us was as close as we could get. It was never clear who “they” or “us” were either.

There was no clearer a picture about what was planned for the Chinese visitors should they have arrived. Who were they meeting? “The professor at the university” and similar. Words to the effect that “Our part of the job is done when we get them to the Fort / University.”

Judith Ost  
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