

FAO Mr Harry Rich  
Office of the Registrar of Consultant Lobbyists  
1 Horse Guards Road (Room 3.26)  
London  
SW1A 2HQ



By email only: [office@orcl.gov.uk](mailto:office@orcl.gov.uk)

17 October 2024

Dear Mr Rich,

### **Investigation into Global Counsel lobbying for the Qatar Free Zones Authority**

We are writing to call for an investigation in light of questions raised by a recent press report about Global Counsel lobbying the UK government on behalf of the state-backed Qatar Free Zones Authority.<sup>1</sup> We have outlined below the background and why in our view there should be an investigation.

#### *Background*

On 25 January 2023, when he was a Minister in the Department for International Trade (DIT), Lord Johnson of Lainston met the CEO of Global Counsel, Benjamin Wegg-Prosser. This was recorded in DIT's transparency data as an *"introductory meeting to discuss UK trade and investment flows."*

DIT provided a readout of the meeting in response to a Freedom of Information (FOI) request from a journalist, Peter Geoghegan.<sup>2</sup> It said that Mr Wegg-Prosser emphasised the opportunities to the UK created by Qatar free zones – and recommended *"twinning"* UK freeports with free trade zones in the Gulf, starting with Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Lord Johnson suggested that they *"look to align their next visits to Qatar and meet for lunch to continue their discussions at a later date."*

On 22 March 2023, when he was a Minister in the Department for Business and Trade (DBT), Lord Johnson had another meeting with Mr Wegg-Prosser. This was recorded in general terms in DBT's transparency data as a meeting with Global Counsel *"to discuss ongoing projects."*

The readout of that meeting, which DBT provided in response to a separate FOI request,<sup>3</sup> states that Lord Johnson and Mr Wegg-Prosser *"...discussed Global Counsel's operations in Qatar, Investment Zones and Lord Johnson's relatively recent visit. Benjamin Wegg-Prosser suggested certain people in Qatar he felt it would be useful for Lord Johnson to meet."*

According to DBT's transparency data, Lord Johnson subsequently met the Qatar Free Zones Authority on 13 June 2023 *"To discuss potential collaboration with UK Freeports."*

The briefing and readout, which DBT provided in response to a further FOI request, note that this meeting took place in the House of Lords on 13 June 2023 and was attended by: Lord Johnson; Sheikh Mohammed Al-Thani, CEO of Qatar Free Zones Authority and a member of the Qatar royal family; Ahmed Helal, Global Counsel MENA Regional Director; and Abdullah Ghanim, Qatar Embassy.

Global Counsel's attendance at this meeting was not mentioned in DBT's transparency data. DBT only released the briefing and readout following an internal review of its FOI response.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://democracyforsale.substack.com/p/peter-mandelsons-firm-secret-lobbying-freeports>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/r/0fa4ad6e-0a1f-41ad-8154-64c7e8f741c4>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/r/f098e642-1036-4e21-a652-bdfe2d8503e4>

The briefing states that this meeting was “Requested by Global Counsel MD Ben Wegg-Prosser. Global Counsel have led and organised this QFZA visit to London.” It added that Lord Johnson had “a breakfast meeting with QFZA Chairman Minister Ahmad Al Sayed in March 2023.”

Mr Geoghegan’s report notes that Lord Johnson’s meeting with Minister Ahmad Al Sayed in March 2023 was not mentioned on his ministerial Twitter/X account or in DBT transparency data, and that DBT did not respond to a request for details of that meeting.

### *The need for an investigation*

In the period January to June 2023, when senior representatives of Global Counsel met Lord Johnson three times to discuss Qatar free zones, and arranged a meeting between the Minister and the CEO of the Qatar Free Zones Authority, Global Counsel Ltd did not list the Authority as a client on the Lobbying Register. The firm did not list any clients or registrable communications in that period.

Global Counsel did not respond to Mr Geoghegan’s question about why the Qatar Free Zones Authority was not registered as a client, and DBT did not respond to his questions. It is therefore not clear:

- whether Global Counsel Ltd was carrying out undeclared consultant lobbying on behalf of the Qatar Free Zones Authority, a Qatar state-backed enterprise;
- whether the Authority was a client of Global Counsel MENA, which was set up in the Qatar Free Zone in February 2022<sup>4</sup> and may not be required to register for VAT;
- what the relationship is between the Authority and Mr Wegg-Prosser, who twice met Lord Johnson to discuss Qatar free zones and requested the meeting for Global Counsel MENA; or
- why DBT did not record in transparency data Lord Johnson’s meeting with Minister Ahmad Al Sayed or the involvement of Global Counsel in its June 2023 meeting with the Authority.

We note your evidence to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee inquiry on the Lobbying Act 2014, in which you highlighted that the VAT test exempts foreign businesses from the Act (and UK lobbyists with a turnover below £85,000, but who may be undertaking significant lobbying), and recommended removing the VAT registration test to support the Act’s transparency purposes.<sup>5</sup>

We also note that the Committee subsequently recommended that the government remove the VAT exemption for consultant lobbyists; and found that the exemption of foreign-based lobbyists (or those working only for foreign-based interests) from the Register is a significant omission in light of measures in the National Security Act designed to stop foreign powers from interfering in UK politics.<sup>6</sup>

Given the public interest in this matter, the unresolved questions and the seriousness of the issues, we respectfully invite you to carry out an investigation to determine the facts. The documents referred to in this letter, that were obtained through FOI requests, were published alongside the press report.

If you would like to discuss or have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Kind regards,



**George Havenhand**  
Senior Legal Researcher  
Spotlight on Corruption

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.global-counsel.com/node/805>

<sup>5</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/123949/html/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/44541/documents/221331/default/>