



Department
for Culture
Media & Sport

Minister for Women and Equalities
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State
4th Floor
100 Parliament Street
London SW1A 2BQ

T: 020 7211 6000
F: 020 7211 6309

www.gov.uk/dcms

Gauri Das
Alliance of Hindu Organisations
(Sent by email)

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Neville Gauri

CASTE

I am writing to let you know how grateful I am that you were able to meet me again on 25 April, and at such short notice. I appreciate the opportunity of meeting to listen to your concerns and to explain the latest Government position on caste. I would also like to pass on the thanks of Baroness Stowell and Baroness Northover, my colleagues in the Lords, for your time and helpful contribution.

I made no secret at our meeting – and nor do I now – of my disappointment that it has been necessary for the Government to concede to making an order to include caste as an element of race in the Equality Act 2010 following the further defeat in the House of Lords. We have always said that prejudice and discrimination in any form is unacceptable in modern society – this is as true for caste as it is for race, sex or disability for example. On caste though we remain concerned that there is insufficient evidence of caste based discrimination to require specific legislation. We also have concerns that incorporating caste into domestic law – even in the context of anti-discrimination – may send out the wrong signal that caste is somehow becoming a permanent feature of British society. However, those most concerned with the Parliamentary handling were aware that a stalemate on caste between the two Houses could have jeopardised the whole Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill, putting at risk a wide range of important reform measures which the Government wants to introduce.

As I explained, the new legislation does not take effect immediately, but depends on Parliament debating and approving regulations which the Government will lay in due course. Caste is a complex and sensitive issue. A full and comprehensive process of public consultation is required on some key issues, including the definition of caste itself, and, once we are clear on that definition, whether there should be any exceptions in the Act that should or should not apply to caste before we would be in a position to prepare and introduce these regulations. The debates in Parliament last week also emphasised the need for employers, organisations and others to get some familiarity with the concept of caste before the law is changed, and also to deal with concerns about increased



bureaucracy and to avoid the need for people to register their caste because of the legislation. As discussed during the Parliamentary debates, thorough and proper consultation on such issues could take up to two years

In addition - because, as I have said, we do not believe or accept that caste and caste divisions should have any long-term future in Britain - we have introduced an additional safeguard into the Act. This is the ability to carry out reviews of caste legislation to see whether it remains appropriate. If it does not, we have the option of removing it from the statute book. This power can be first used five years after the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Act is passed - which happened last week - and at any time after that.

As I said, the timetabling of consultation is a matter we are still working through at present. I will ensure that officials from the Equalities Office and Department for Communities and Local Government keep you and your organisations informed on the plans. I would urge you all to take an active part in the consultation process to ensure that your concerns are heard and that your point of view is taken into consideration. I also very much hope you will continue to support the *Talk For A Change* education programme, as we remain convinced that this approach, through persuasion rather than legislation, is the most appropriate way of tackling caste prejudice and discrimination in this country.

Finally, I would like to thank you very much for your efforts in bringing your concerns to the attention of peers and MPs so that your opinions were heard in the most recent Parliamentary debates. I hope that you will continue to take an active role throughout the consultation period and help us to make sure that any legislation is as focussed as possible.



HELEN GRANT

Minister for Women and Equalities
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State

E: enquiries@culture.gsi.gov.uk