Brexit minister reported over gift from group that gave £400k to DUP

Oliver Wright Policy Editor

A Brexit minister has been reported to parliament’s standards watchdog over a donation he accepted from a mysterious group that helped to bankroll the Brexit referendum campaign.

Steve Baker, a prominent Brexiteer who was promoted by Theresa May after the election to work alongside David Davis, the Brexit secretary, took £6,500 from an organisation called the Constitutional Research Council (CRC).

The same group was behind a donation of £425,622 to the Democratic Unionist Party during the DUP’s unsuccessful campaign. That money was not spent in Northern Ireland but on a national newspaper advertising campaign backing Brexit in England and Scotland.

The CRC has no other record of donations, has no website, no published membership list or any trace of being registered as a company.

Ben Bradshaw, the former Labour culture minister, has written to Kathryn Hudson, the parliamentary commissioner for standards, asking her to investigate the donation.

Under the rules, an MP must satisfy themselves that any donation made to them comes from a “permissible donor”.

In his letter, Mr Bradshaw said there was “strong evidence” that the Electoral Commission had found that the CRC was not a permissible donor because it was not registered.

Mr Bradshaw said that he wanted Ms Hudson to establish whether the CRC was a “permissible donor within the framework of the Electoral Commission’s guidelines at the time the donation to Mr Baker was made”. Mr Baker said he was confident that the donation was registered within the rules. The CRC has claimed that it is registered with the commission.

The CRC and its donation to the DUP has been a source of controversy since it emerged in February. At the time Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, the DUP defence spokesman, said the CRC was “a unionist organisation based in Great Britain”. He said it was headed by Richard Cook, a former Scottish Tory candidate and vice chairman of the party, but declined to provide details of other members.

Mr Cook, who formerly worked as a national sales manager at Biffa Waste Services, does not appear to be wealthy enough to be able to afford such a large donation on his own. He and his wife Elaine live in a modest semi-detached house near Glasgow.

Mr Cook has previously declined to name either the CRC members or donors. Mr Bradshaw has previously raised the issue of the DUP with Andrea Leadsom, leader of the Commons. She said: “I share his concern that we need to make sure that all donations are permissible and legal.”

Last night he said: “We know a donation from this organisation to the DUP in the EU Referendum was ruled impermissible by the Electoral Commission and the DUP were fined.

“So, there can be no reasonable expectation that standards commissioner can satisfy herself that a similar breach has not occurred here.”

A spokesman for Mr Baker said: “All the steps have been taken to ensure donations are registered and accepted in accordance with the rules, and we are confident that they do so.”

Mr Cook has previously told the Sunday Herald: “The CRC is regulated by the Electoral Commission. We operate solely in the UK. We accept donations only from eligible UK donors. Any suggestion that we have done anything else is basically defamatory.”