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D/MST/4/5/2/17

30 November 2010

I am very much aware of the campaign, spearheaded by the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), aimed at persuading the Government to procure an alternative ceremonial cap for the Foot Guards Regiments that is not constructed from animal fur.

The bearskin cap has been associated with the Guards Division since a Royal Warrant was issued by King George III in 1768 which ordered the replacing of the "Mitre" cap with a cap made from the skin of a black bear. To this day, these caps continue to be issued to Officers and Other Ranks of the Foot Guards to be worn during the execution of their public duties, including the guarding of Royal residencies and during ceremonial occasions such as The Queen's Birthday Parade and the State Opening of Parliament.

Around 1,900 caps are in service with the Foot Guards, and each pelt can be expected to last for around 50 years undergoing a number of restorations during that time. The purchase of new pelts is therefore kept to a minimum. In the past 12 months the Ministry of Defence (MOD) has purchased 139 new caps, and 39 caps have also been refurbished.

Over the years the MOD has consistently adopted a neutral position on the use of real fur in ceremonial clothing. Like my predecessors, I am entirely open to the use of faux fur where this provides a suitable and affordable alternative. However, in the case of bearskins, this cannot be to the detriment of the iconic image of a Guardsman in ceremonial uniform and no alternative has yet been identified that matches the impressive properties and visual appearance of black bear fur.

In July 2010 I had a useful and constructive meeting with PETA to discuss this issue at which they provided a new faux fur replacement cap that I have agreed to the MOD trialling. There is no firm timescale in which this trial will report and, in part because of the very severe financial pressure the MOD faces, the Department is not funded to invest in the further development of this or other products to replace entirely serviceable accoutrements. However, I emphasise that I remain open to the possibility that this will provide a suitable alternative in due course.

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