

# U.S. House of Representatives

## Committee on Natural Resources

Washington, DC 20515

October 18, 2018

The Honorable Michael E. Horowitz  
Chair  
Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency  
1717 H Street, NW, Suite 825  
Washington, DC 20006

Dear Mr. Horowitz:

We write about the replacement of Department of the Interior (DOI) Deputy Inspector General (IG) Mary L. Kendall with a political appointee from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). It is not clear that the new acting IG is sufficiently qualified or politically independent to take the helm of the Office of Inspector General, particularly at such an important time for the office.

On Friday, October 12 at 3:56 PM, HUD Secretary Ben Carson sent an email to undisclosed recipients, many of which were HUD employees, that said “It is with mixed emotions that I announce that Suzanne Israel Tufts, our Assistant Secretary for Administration, has decided to leave HUD to become the Acting Inspector General at the Department of Interior.” A spokesperson from HUD confirmed that “Tufts is being detailed to the IG’s office.”<sup>1</sup> Ms. Kendall was not notified.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to an impending report about his wife’s travel, we know of at least three investigations related to Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke that are currently underway. They involve issues and instances for which adverse findings could have major ramifications for the Secretary. One explores a land development deal in his hometown of Whitefish in which a foundation he started gave away donated land in exchange for inclusion of a microbrewery the Secretary had been trying to stand up for years. The deal involved the Chairman of Halliburton, a multinational oilfield services corporation that is affected by several decisions before DOI. He met with three developers from the project in his DOI office and took them on a personal tour of the Lincoln Memorial, but the meeting was not included in his publicly disclosed calendar, creating the appearance of a cover-up.

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<sup>1</sup> Green, Miranda. “HUD political appointee to replace Interior Department inspector general.” *The Hill*. 16 Oct 2018. <https://thehill.com/policy/energy-environment/411631-hud-political-appointee-to-replace-interior-department-inspector>

<sup>2</sup> Id

Another DOI OIG investigation involves potential improper influence in the controversial shrinking of the boundaries of Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument. Still another looks at a decision about whether to permit a new Connecticut casino; a staff recommendation to rule against MGM Resorts International was overruled after Secretary Zinke met with MGM lobbyists. These are only the ongoing investigations that have been publicly disclosed. Others are likely to exist.

These high-stakes investigations create an important backdrop for the effort to replace DOI's watchdog. Without an explanation to the contrary, replacing an acting IG with another acting IG creates the appearance of an attempt to influence ongoing investigations. Replacing an acting IG with a political appointee creates the appearance of an attempt to influence ongoing investigations. Replacing an acting IG with someone with no significant experience with DOI issues or in conducting investigations creates the appearance of an attempt to influence ongoing investigations. All three apply in this case.

At HUD, Ms. Tufts was selected to replace Helen Foster, a whistleblower who revealed the purchase of a \$31,000 dining room set for Mr. Carson's office, budget irregularities, and the improper handling of public information requests made pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act.<sup>3,4</sup> Ms. Foster believes she was removed from her position in an act of retaliation.<sup>5</sup>

The mere threat of replacing an IG when the head of the agency it oversees is under heavy scrutiny will send a signal to current and future IGs throughout the federal government that releasing unfavorable findings may threaten their job. It creates a permanent disincentive for the candor required for an effective IG and severs the independence that is the foundation of effective oversight over federal government waste, fraud, and abuse.

While Suzanne Israel Tufts' nomination as Assistant Secretary for Administration at HUD was easily confirmed by the Senate, it is not clear that she also has the experience that would qualify her to act as the Inspector General for DOI. The Inspector General Reform Act of 2008 requires that the Council of Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency (CIGIE) "submit recommendations of individuals to the appropriate appointing authority for any appointment to an office of Inspector General..."<sup>6</sup>

We look forward to better understanding whether Suzanne Israel Tufts has been recommended or vetted in any way for her appointment as Acting Inspector General for DOI by CIGIE as required by law. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions.

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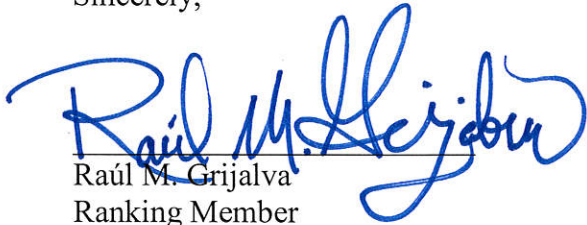
<sup>3</sup> Thrush, Glenn. "Emails Contradict Ben Carson's Claims About \$31,000 Dining Set for Office." 14 Mar 2018. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/14/us/ben-carson-dining-table.html>

<sup>4</sup> Swaine, Jon and Jacobs, Ben. "US official: I was demoted for rejecting Ben Carson's costly office revamp." 27 Feb 2018. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/feb/27/hud-ben-carson-office-redecoration-trump-appointee>

<sup>5</sup> Id

<sup>6</sup> 5 USC App 11(c)(1)(F)

Sincerely,



Raúl M. Grijalva  
Ranking Member  
House Committee on Natural Resources



Donald S. Beyer, Jr.  
Member of Congress



A. Donald McEachin  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Oversight and  
Investigations



Jared Huffman  
Vice-Ranking Member  
House Committee on Natural  
Resources