



DEBATE PACK

Number CDP-0161, 13 September 2017

Abuse and intimidation of candidates at general elections

General debate in the Commons Chamber

14 September 2017

The debate follows Question Time (9.30am-10.30am) but may start later if there are any statements, urgent questions or emergency debates.

Summary

A debate on the same subject was scheduled to take place in Government time on Monday 17 July 2017. However, an emergency debate on the Scheduling of Parliamentary Business meant that the debate on the abuse and intimidation of candidates did not take place.

After the 2017 General Election several Members raised the problem of the abuse and threats of violence experienced by candidates during the campaign. During a Westminster Hall debate on the subject, held on 12 July 2017, many Members detailed their experiences of such abuse.

The Prime Minister has asked the Committee on Standards in Public Life to conduct a short review of the issue of intimidation experienced by Parliamentary candidates. In July it issued a call for evidence by 5 September 2017. On 14 September 2017 it held evidence sessions in Portcullis House. It will publish its report in due course.

Specialist:

Neil Johnston

Statistician:

Noel Dempsey

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The House of Commons Library prepares a briefing in hard copy and/or online for most non-legislative debates in the Chamber and Westminster Hall other than half-hour debates. Debate Packs are produced quickly after the announcement of parliamentary business. They are intended to provide a summary or overview of the issue being debated and identify relevant briefings and useful documents, including press and parliamentary material. More detailed briefing can be prepared for Members on request to the Library.

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1. Background

In a healthy democracy people expect that in the cut and thrust of an election campaign, candidates seeking election are scrutinised and questioned. However, the recent general election campaign again produced examples of incidences where candidates were subject to abusive behaviour that went well beyond the cut and thrust of an election campaign.

Candidates from all parties reported verbal abuse, graffiti and even death threats during the campaign.

Sheryll Murray, Conservative MP for South East Cornwall, highlighted the problem at the first Prime Minister's Questions of the new Parliament, when [she spoke of having swastikas carved into campaign posters and abusive online messages](#).

Both Mrs Murray and the Prime Minister highlighted the concern that intimidation could be deterring people from becoming candidates.

These incidences continue when Members take their seats in the House of Commons. In a Westminster Hall debate on the same subject, held on 12 July 2017, many Members spoke of the abuse they have regularly received as candidates during elections and as Members of Parliament.

These incidences often spike when controversial subjects are addressed by Parliament. Stella Creasy, Labour Co-operative MP for Walthamstow, has said recently she received [a torrent of abusive letters and online messages](#) following her successful campaign to secure NHS funding for abortions for women in Northern Ireland. She was also the victim of online trolling in 2014 after supporting the campaign to have an image of Jane Austen on £10 notes. This [led to a prosecution and the sentencing](#) of the perpetrator for 18 weeks.

The Library briefing [Online harassment and cyber bullying](#) has more information on the current situation. The general legal principle is that what is illegal offline is also illegal online. There are a number of criminal offences which can be involved, including stalking, harassment, sending malicious communications and improper use of a public electronic communications network.

The Prime Minister has asked the [Committee on Standards in Public Life](#) to conduct a short review of the issue of intimidation experienced by Parliamentary candidates. The Committee will also consider the broader implications of the issue of intimidation for other holders of public office. One of the issues it will consider is whether or not existing legislation is sufficient to address the intimidation of candidates and MPs.

1.1 Westminster Hall debate, 12 July 2017

Simon Hart, Conservative MP for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire secured a [Westminster Hall debate on 12 July](#) on the same subject.

Many Members speaking in the debate gave examples of the sort of abuse they have regularly received as candidates during elections and as Members of Parliament. Many reported that their experiences of the 2017 General Election were the worst they could remember. Some Members expressed a similar view to that of Sheryll Murray that such abuse could be deterring people from entering politics, particularly women.

Some Members also highlighted examples of activists and supporters being abused, including receiving hate mail because they had put an election posters in their windows.

A lot of the abuse received was online. Several Members raised the issue that the anonymous and effort free nature of abusive social media posts has made the abusive content more extreme. This was highlighted by a recent Demos report on digital politics in the UK:

What is clear though, is that the anonymous and 'safe distance' nature of social media platforms allows such abuse to be handed out far less respectfully than it would usually be if delivered face-to-face. Politicians of all parties have recently been highlighting this issue and its negative impact on the political process.¹

Members on all sides felt that social media providers could do more to remove abusive material and to do it more quickly.

Front-bench spokespersons called for a cross-party response to the issue. Tommy Sheppard, for the SNP, called for a voluntary code of conduct among political parties that states what is acceptable and what is not. Cat Smith, for the Labour Party, also called for a code of conduct that political parties could work together on.

Parliamentary Secretary at the Cabinet Office, Chris Skidmore MP, responded to the debate. He announced that the Prime Minister had asked the Committee on Standards in Public Life to conduct a review of the intimidation experienced by Parliamentary candidates. He said:

It will be for the committee to determine the exact parameters of the review, but we anticipate that it will want to examine the nature of the problem and the protections and measures currently in place, and whether those need to change.

The committee may also consider the broader implication of other office holders—the role of councillors was mentioned. Foremost, the review will look at intimidation experienced by anyone who has stood as a parliamentary candidate. I am sure the committee will want to progress that work as quickly as possible. It will produce a report for the Prime Minister with specific recommendations for actions, and we look forward to its findings.

¹ Demos, [Signal and Noise Can technology provide a window into the new world of digital politics in the UK?](#) May 2017

The Minister also referred to social media providers and the *Digital Economy Act 2017*:

[The Act] will also help to ensure that online abuse is more effectively tackled by requiring a code of practice to be established. The code will set out guidance about what social media providers should do in relation to conduct on their platforms that involves bullying or insulting an individual or other behaviour likely to intimidate or humiliate them. The Government are considering how to take forward the social media code of practice as part of the newly established digital charter, and we will provide more details shortly about when the consultation with social media will take place.

He concluded by saying:

We owe it to our democracy to make clear that intimidation and abuse have no part in our society, not only for candidates who stood at the recent general election but for future generations of men and women who are considering entering public life and standing for election. No one must be deterred from playing their part in our democracy, which is why we must seek to end the corrosive effect that abuse and intimidation has of actively discouraging future generations from standing as our representatives. [[HC Deb 12 July 2017, c167-9WH](#)]

1.1 Committee on Standards in Public Life review

The Prime Minister has asked, as mentioned above, the Committee on Standards in Public Life to conduct a short review of the issue of intimidation experienced by Parliamentary candidates.

The review will:

- examine the nature of the problem and consider whether measures already in place to address such behaviour are sufficient to protect the integrity of public service; and whether such measures are (a) effective, especially given the rise of social media, and (b) enforceable and
- produce a report for the Prime Minister, including recommendations for action focused on what could be done in the short- and long-term, and identifying examples of good practice.

It issued a [call for evidence](#) in July 2017. The deadline for submissions was the 5 September 2017. In addition the Committee held a round table discussion with invited contributors on 12 September and a summary is due to be published on the [Committee's web pages](#). It is also holding two [evidence sessions](#) in Parliament on 14 September 2017. The first session is to be held in private and is due to hear from the following witnesses:

- Crown Prosecution Service
- Director of Security, Houses of Parliament
- The National Police Chiefs' Council
- Deputy Speaker and Chairman of Ways and Means, House of Commons

The second session, to be held in public, will hear from

- Rt Hon Sir Patrick McLoughlin MP: Chair, Conservative Party
- Cat Smith MP: Shadow Minister (Cabinet Office) (Voter Engagement and Youth Affairs), Labour Party
- Baroness Brinton: President, Liberal Democrat Party

A transcript of the public session will be published.

The Committee inquiry will also consider the broader implications of the issue of intimidation for other holders of public office. [Announcing the review](#), Lord Bew, the current chair of the Committee, said:

As an independent Committee, we will consider this issue on a non-partisan basis. Members of Parliament and candidates from a range of political backgrounds have been subjected to intimidation. It is important to shed light on these experiences to inform efforts to better protect those affected and at the same time maintain healthy, robust debate and legitimate scrutiny from the public and the press.

In particular, we will want to examine how social media tends to amplify, intensify, and escalate some of the long-standing issues which the Committee has been concerned about.

How those in public life and candidates for public office are treated inevitably has implications for standards in public life more broadly, including how public office holders relate to members of the public.

1.2 All-Party Parliamentary inquiry into electoral conduct

These incidences are not new. In 2013 the All-Party Parliamentary Group Against Antisemitism commissioned an inquiry into electoral conduct. The inquiry was chaired by the then Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, Natascha Engel. When [publishing the report](#) she said:

This inquiry is unique. It is the first time parliamentarians have systemically analysed electoral life with a view to eliminating racism and discrimination from it. We achieved cross-party consensus on issues of vital importance to our democracy. We now need to focus on maintaining the pressure on electoral and equalities institutions to play their part.

The inquiry heard evidence from a wide range of politicians and groups. [Its report](#) stated that:

We were particularly shocked by some of the electoral campaign stories that we heard during the oral evidence sessions. A key problem in addressing this issue is that it has not been the focus of any significant research.²

² [Report of the All-party Parliamentary Inquiry into Electoral Conduct](#), October page 9

During its investigations the inquiry found many candidates afraid to give evidence for fear that they would become even more prominent targets.

The report did not seek to impose limitations on free speech, an important feature of an open democracy, but wanted to draw on good practice to find ways in which discrimination and abuses of free speech can be appropriately reported and actioned. It made a number of recommendations.

The All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Electoral Conduct published updates on the [2015 General Election](#) and on the [2017 General Election](#).

The 2017 report concludes by saying:

Regrettably, racism and bigotry have not dissipated, and at certain points in the past two years, have been on the rise. To date, however, the improvement in the general conduct of candidates appears to have been maintained. Many of the examples of misconduct relate either to local council elections or to exposures relating to past social media postings. Political parties remain, to their credit, generally swift to act; however, their lack of effort to implement the recommendations is disappointing, and likely an act of long-term self-harm.

Many of the recommendations of the previous all-party parliamentary report have now been enacted. The police, Electoral Commission, Equality and Human Rights Commission, and others, have sought to improve their practice.

The key recommendation that remains is for parties to introduce frameworks to better select, prepare, support and, where appropriate, discipline candidates at all levels of election: local to national. However, the introduction of primary legislation to ensure the implementation of the Law Commission's suggested changes is imperative. Finally, better collection and analysis of election-related racism and discrimination data should be secured and the EHRC might play a helpful role in this regard. Members of Parliament involved with this inquiry process, will continue to advocate for these various measures to be taken forward over the coming years. The Electoral Conduct report shone a light on a frequently overlooked area of British public policy. Hopefully, its impact has led to a change in approach which will be longstanding and effective.

1.3 Regulation of campaign material

Campaign material in UK elections and referendums is largely unregulated and it is a matter for voters to decide on the basis of such material whether they consider it accurate or not. There are two important exceptions.

The first is making or publishing a false statement of fact in relation to a candidate's personal character or conduct (not their political views or conduct), unless there are reasonable grounds to believe the statement is true. The Electoral Commission does not regulate this rule and any allegations should be made to the police.

The second is the requirement for an imprint on election material. An imprint must be added to printed election material, or online material designed to be printed, to show who is responsible for its production. It helps to ensure that there is transparency about who is campaigning.

However, imprints on online material, whilst good practice recommended by the Electoral Commission, are not a requirement. One of the recommendations of the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Electoral Conduct recommended that online material should also be required to have an imprint. This is a recommendation that the Law Commission also advocated in its recent review of Electoral Law, subject to a practicability provision.

1.4 Existing legal remedies

The wider law does generally apply to political campaign material, such as on copyright, libel, contempt, obscenity, incitement to racial hatred or violence.

There are already laws in place which can be used to prosecute prosecuting cases involving abusive communications sent via social media, such as threats of violence, indecent or obscene message. Some have argued that existing offences are adequate to deal with online harassment. Others have pointed out that several offences pre-date the widespread use of social media platforms, and have called for the law to be reviewed.

The Library briefing [Online harassment and cyber bullying](#), has more information on the current situation and the pressure for changes in the law.

The All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry received evidence from the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and a number of the Local Authorities that submitted evidence that there is sufficient legal provision to address incidents of racism and discrimination in UK elections. The CPS published [guidelines on prosecuting cases involving communications sent via social media](#) in 2013.

In the Westminster Hall debate on 12 July 2017 on abuse and intimidation in UK elections, the Minister reiterated this view:

The law is clear that what is illegal offline is also illegal online. Robust legislation is in place to deal with internet trolls, cyber-stalking and harassment and the perpetrators of grossly offensive, obscene or menacing behaviour. [[HC Deb 12 July 2017, c167WH](#)]

However, the law is complex and victims of online abuse often do not realise a crime has been committed. The All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry reported “that is not to say the law is not, as it was put to us “underused or misunderstood.”

Liz Saville Roberts, Plaid Cymru MP for Dwyfor Meirionnydd, highlighted the issue in a [Ten Minute Rule Bill in March 2016](#):

Charities, agencies and police involved in tackling stalking and harassment, hate crimes and abuse are only too aware that criminals and abusers are using technology to target victims. The

challenge here is to identify what is criminal behaviour and to respond appropriately.

The purposes of the Bill was to undertake a review of all relevant legislation and to consolidate powers contained in a list of statutes into a single Bill.

In November 2014, John Mann, Labour MP for Bassetlaw, [led an adjournment debate](#) on online abuse of MPs. He also highlighted the problem of prosecuting online abuse. He spoke of the case involving Stella Creasy MP and the Jane Austen £10 note, mentioned above:

My hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), who successfully prosecuted, said that

“the authorities didn’t even know how to begin investigating whether one person was sending these messages”—

the abusive, hateful and violent messages she was receiving—

“or many individuals”

In responding to the debate, the Minister said:

As Members may know...a number of offences may be committed by those who abuse others over the internet, including those who abuse members of Parliament. I fully accept what the hon. Gentleman said about inactivity in some cases, but I assure him that the Government are working and engaging with social media platforms, the police and other stakeholders with a view to trying to improve the position. It is by no means perfect, but we are working hard to try to make it a great deal better than it is at present.

2. Press Articles

Please note: the Library is not responsible for either the views or accuracy of external content.

Parties' trolls face boot over MP abuse

Caroline Wheeler, The Times (subscription required)
10 Sep 2017

We tracked 25,688 abusive tweets sent to women MPs – half were directed at Diane Abbott

Azmina Dhrodia, researcher at Amnesty International
New Statesman
5 Sep 2017

Amnesty have been investigating the extent of online abuse against women MPs active on Twitter. The findings outlined in this post provide a detailed look at abuse on Twitter in the run-up to the 2017 election.

Lewes MP Maria Caulfield got 'frightening' death threats

BBC News
5 Sep 2017

Speaking of her experience, Ms Caulfield said: "I've had my tyres slashed, I've had death threats, my office graffitied.

MP Jess Phillips forced to filter her tweets after 600 rape threats in a day

Francis Elliott, The Times (subscription required)
26 Aug 2017

"The Labour MP Jess Phillips has revealed that she has had to filter her Twitter feed to fend off rape threats after receiving 600 in one day. T

Twitter failing to act on graphic images and abusive messages, says MP

The Guardian
1 Aug 2017

Yvette Cooper and Fawcett Society boss Sam Smethers write to firm for explanation of methodology and timescales for removing online abuse

Labour MP Steve McCabe attacked with brick by 'motorbike thug'

Sophie Jamieson, The Telegraph,
31 Jul 2017

The member for Birmingham Selly Oak said he was suffering from a "very sore & swollen face" following the incident and that he had given a statement to police.

MPs reveal scale of abuse they receive from the public

John Owen, BBC News

26 Jul 2017

MPs of all parties have shed light on the scale of abuse they receive. Conservative MP Simon Hart said much of it was "orchestrated from the left", and that the Labour leadership had not done enough to prevent it. Labour's Cat Smith said personal attacks by Tories "bordered on racist" and gave tacit permission for others to engage in abuse online.

'We don't have bodyguards, we are completely vulnerable': female MPs on the fears they face

Gaby Hinsliff, The Guardian

25 Jul 2017

"Paula Sherriff tries her best not to be paranoid, or let it get in the way of her work as an MP. But, ever since her friend and colleague Jo Cox was murdered in the street a few miles from where Sherriff lives, she has found threats of violence against her hard to shrug off.

[Photo of headless corpse and social media death threat sent to MP](#)

Gloucestershire Live, 26/07

"A photograph of a headless corpse was sent to Cheltenham MP Alex Chalk as part of a social media death threat, he has revealed.

[New Scots Lib Dem MP Christine Jardine speaks of online abuse](#)

The Herald, 26/07

"A newly elected MP has spoken of "extremely upsetting" online abuse a month into the job as concerns grow over the scale of the attacks targeted at politicians. As calls for action over abuse including rape and death threats are amplified Lib Dem Christine Jardine said all political parties should take responsibility for trolling elements claiming some form of association with their party. The Edinburgh West MP said in one incident she was wrongly accused by an activist of breaking the suspension of election campaigning in the aftermath of the Manchester bombing, on the day when she had been attending her husband's funeral."

Male Tory MP candidates received highest percentage of Twitter abuse during election campaign

Jack Maidment, Telegraph

24 Jul 2017

"Male Tory MP candidates received the highest percentage of abuse on Twitter during the General Election campaign, new research has shown. Almost six per cent of messages directed at male Conservative candidates were found to be abusive while about two per cent of mentions involving female Labour candidates were abusive.

Online trolling laws under consideration following abuse of MPs

Rachel Roberts, The Independent

24 Jul 2017

Committee will look at whether existing legislation around hate speech is still fit for purpose with the rise of social media

Harriet Harman seeks political unity in fight to stop abuse of female MPs

Anushka Asthana, The Guardian

14 Jul 2017

Harriet Harman has called on Labour women to speak out against any abuse and intimidation aimed at female Conservative MPs, warning that "a misogynistic attack on one woman is a misogynistic attack on all women".

Theresa May announces independent review into 'horrific' abuse suffered by MPs

Steven Swinford, The Telegraph

12 Jul 2017

The Prime Minister asked the Committee on Standards in Public Life to conduct a review into the problem as MPs gathered in Westminster Hall to discuss the apparent rise in personal attacks.

3. Parliamentary material

3.1 Questions

Business Questions

HC Deb 29 Jun 2017 c745

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Yesterday at Prime Minister's questions my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) bravely raised both the personal impact of online abuse and the direct effect that it had during her campaign and those of many other female candidates across the UK. As the previous chair of the all-party women in Parliament group, may I ask the Leader of the House to make time for a debate on the issue so that the House can express its disgust at such direct abuse? We must not let it put off the women leaders of the future coming to this House.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): I completely agree with my hon. Friend. The number of colleagues who were genuinely scared for their personal safety during the recent general election campaign was a total disgrace. There was the appalling, disgusting behaviour of the defacement of offices and posters, and the constant tearing down on social media of colleagues' efforts to get elected. It is an appalling indictment of our society that such things have been allowed to happen, and I certainly think that the House will want to take the matter further.

Prime Minister's Question

HC Deb 28 Jun 2017 c585

Mrs Murray: Over the past months I have had swastikas carved into posters; social media posts such as "Burn the witch" and "Stab the c***"; people putting Labour party posters on my home, photographing them and pushing them through my letterbox; and even someone urinating on my office door—hardly kinder, gentler politics. Can my right hon. Friend suggest what can be done to stop such intimidation, which may well put off good people from serving in this place?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue and she was not the only person to experience such intimidation during the election campaign. This sort of intimidation was experienced—I am sorry to say—by female candidates in particular. I believe that such behaviour has no place in our democracy. She is right: it could put good people off serving in this House. We want more people to become engaged and to want to stand for election to this House. As I stand here and see the plaque dedicated to the late Jo Cox, I think we should all remember what Jo said, that "we are far more united and have far more in common" [*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.] with each other than the things that divide us.

3.2 Debates

Abuse and intimidation of candidates and the public in UK elections

Adjournment debate

HC Deb 12 Jul 2017 c152-70WH

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): I should start by saying that since the election the Conservative Whips Office has been dealing with at least three credible threats to colleagues every week, including death threats, criminal damage, sexism, racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism and general thuggishness around and after the election. For all I know, other parties' Whips Offices may be having similar experiences, and I look forward to hearing cross-party contributions on that score. It is for that reason, and a few others, that I thought it was appropriate to call this debate now.

Online Abuse

Adjournment debate

HC Deb 7 Jul 2016 cc1063-1108

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab) [Extract]: I am sure that many of my fellow female Members from across the House are, unfortunately, all too familiar with this kind of online abuse. The anonymity and distance that people think social media gives them enables them to say things online that I hope they would never say face to face, but this online abuse must be tackled so that it does not prevent women from wanting to get involved in public life.

Internet Abuse of Members of Parliament

Adjournment debate

HC Deb 4 Nov 2014 cc796-804

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I wish to raise the problems that Members of the House and many more people in our communities face from the abuse of social media. For me, and probably for all hon. Members, social media has huge benefits. It is a great liberator and gives many new opportunities to people throughout the world to communicate in different ways. However, it has a small but vicious and nasty downside. Indeed, having called the debated, I noted a story in the newspapers. Mr Yaya Touré, a footballer, went back on to Twitter after five months and was immediately viciously abused by racists. Mr Robert Hannigan, the head of GCHQ, said this morning that internet companies are in denial over the use of the internet by terrorists and criminals.

We have seen the most grotesque misuse of the right of freedom of expression by individuals using the internet in a series of cases affecting Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), who successfully prosecuted, said that "the authorities didn't even

know how to begin investigating whether one person was sending these messages”— the abusive, hateful and violent messages she was receiving— “or many individuals”.

The grotesque racist abuse from a whole range of people in the past few weeks aimed at my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) has been a factor in my request to Mr Speaker to grant this debate. On Saturday, 10 people were arrested as a direct consequence of issues raised on the internet. When I had the temerity to raise the issue on a point of order in the House, I received the most extraordinary fake messages, allegedly in my name, which were deliberately meant to upset, alienate and aggrieve individuals in the community: incendiary words that were fiction and mere lies— nothing I would ever contemplate saying—but put up by one of these individuals in my name and then spread by others across the internet. There has been an arrest in the past few days.

4. Further reading

4.1 Commons Library briefings

Commons Debate pack, *Abuse and intimidation of candidates and the public in elections*, 12 July 2017

Debate pack prepared ahead of the Westminster Hall debate on abuse and intimidation of candidates and the public in UK elections.

Commons Briefing paper, *Online harassment and cyber bullying*, 09 Jun 2017

There have been calls to review the law covering online harassment and cyber bullying. The Conservative and Labour manifestos both contained proposals to deal with the issue. So will the law change? This Briefing Paper focusses mainly on England and Wales, but also touches on the law and relevant guidance in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

See Section 7: [Online abuse of Members of Parliament](#)

Commons Debate pack, *Online abuse*, 06 Jul 2016

Debate pack prepared ahead of the adjournment debate on online abuse

4.2 Committee on Standards in Public Life

Committee on Standards in Public Life: Press release, *Intimidation of Parliamentary candidates: Committee announces short review*, 12 July 2017

Joint press release with the Cabinet Office, *Review into abuse and intimidation in elections*, 12 July 2017

4.3 Inter-Parliamentary Union

IPU Press Release, [IPU study reveals widespread sexism, harassment and violence against women MPs](#)

IPU, *Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians*, 26 Oct 2016

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