

TRANSCRIPT OF HEARING WITH AIMEE CHALLENGOR, GREEN PARTY CANDIDATE FOR COVENTRY SOUTH IN 2017 GENERAL ELECTION

21 September 2017, London

Committee members present: Lord Bew (Chair), Sheila Drew Smith OBE, Dr Jane Martin CBE, Jane Ramsey, Monisha Shah, Rt Hon Lord Stunell OBE

Lord Bew: We are very grateful to you for coming along today. This is not a new issue, some say it is the behaviour of politicians that bring this upon themselves. Most say that something happened to a new level in the last election. We would like to hear your experience.

Aimee Challenor: Good morning, my name is Aimee Challenor. I stood in Coventry South for the Green Party in the last General Election, I'm 19 and I'm openly transgender.

It is my opinion that our society as a whole is becoming more divided, with an increasing amount of hate being reported each year. Not just in the past election. This applies to those in the public life just as much as anyone else, and in today's social media era, it is relentless.

In the election campaign, I was targeted because I was an openly transgender person in politics, I received tweets or direct messages calling me a "*delusional child abusing freak*". I had people telling me to kill myself, comments saying "*zero debate needed, just point and laugh hysterically. This **** needs bullying*". It is quite clear from the most recent general election in the UK, as well as conduct during other recent elections around the world, that politics is becoming more toxic. Intimidation from activists, members, and indeed other candidates is growing. More can, and should, be done by all parties to tackle this behaviour and offer support to candidates.

These actions should include implementation and proper enforcement of Codes of Conduct, as well as the introduction of a 'Candidate Welfare Officer' or similar, so that Candidates may have a point-of-contact. It is also my belief that action needs to be improved beyond political parties, social media websites need to improve at removing abusive content: too often I see "*We reviewed your report carefully and found that there was no violation of our Rules regarding abusive behavior*" - this has happened with some of the comments I read out to you earlier. Division in society is fuelled by social media; people feel they have an anonymous face. And it is fuelled by others behaving in a hateful way, it encourages others.

Politics is also to blame. The Referendum campaign was very divisive, and hateful to particular groups of people. This legitimised the abusive behaviour that candidates have had to face this year.

More needs to be done by the Police, when I myself have reported abusive content to the appropriate authorities, it's been brushed aside and eventually not even forwarded on to the Crown Prosecution Service.

Therefore I'd like to suggest that the Committee should hear from social networks themselves, it would be sad if if you only look at what political parties should do to help

candidates, which is definitely part of the solution, but political parties are going to need the help of those who can take enforcement action.

Why is it so important we get this right? Because Parliament is meant to be representative of society, but with the threat of intimidation and abuse becoming ever larger, diverse candidates are questioning whether or not to stand. In the 2017 General Election, there were only 9 openly transgender candidates across all parties across the United Kingdom,

To summarise; 1. There is a growing division in this country, and more needs to be done to address it. 2. The Committee should hear from social media companies 3. Parties can and should do more, I'd like to see a Candidate Welfare Officer in each Party 4. Intimidation and abuse of candidates needs to be taken more seriously by those who can take action.

Lord Bew: Have other Green Party candidates faced intimidation?

Aimee Challenor: We are a small Party so fortunate to have less amount of abuse because of that status, but people have faced death and rape threats, racism, sexism, and other forms of abuse.

There have been no formal complaints against our candidates, but one member was raising concern because of their behaviour towards a Labour candidate. This was discussed with them and a conclusion was reached. That person subsequently decided to step away from party involvement after discussions with other party members.

Jane Ramsey: We are very sad and sorry to hear what you experienced. Do you have other views about what duties political parties have to moderate their candidates?

Aimee Challenor: There should be a strong Code of Conduct. We have one and a specific policy with regard to bullying behaviour. We don't tolerate it. There should be a welfare officer, if only to signpost further. Local Council candidates in general face it too. The public see no difference between local and national candidates.

Lord Stunell: Good to hear you have a Code of Conduct. Can you let us see it? And does the Green Party have a welfare officer?

Aimee Challenor: I'll email the Code. We don't have a welfare officer. The Green Party operates very regionally, but we are considering this based on requests from candidates.

Sheila Drew Smith: What happens when a candidate is threatened?

Aimee Challenor: It depends on the wishes of the candidate. The Party can provide general support but there are no direct structures or policy in place. We always try to support them and are looking to into developing a named role, such as a welfare officer, to support them.

Sheila Drew Smith: What about particular groups needing support?

Aimee Challenor: We have particular groups e.g. Greens of colour, women, LGBTIQ+ and others. These groups specialise in supporting these people - has led to better relations with the Party. At election time they form a key part of supporting those groups of people. Generally, it's support with emails, social media, and peer support. We did some press handling too for a transgender candidate where the local media wanted to write pieces referring to the candidate's gender identity in a sensationalist way and the candidate was very uncomfortable with their use of language. We worked with the paper and also reported to Trans Media Watch, which did help. After we spoke to the newspaper, they did write a piece using more appropriate language.

Jane Martin: Are there any particular challenges or opportunities for smaller parties in combatting intimidation by their members? Does the size of your Party make it easier or more difficult to support members who are experiencing intimidation during election campaigns?

Aimee Challenor: It is friendlier. But there are fewer staff to focus on support, fewer staff so people doing multiple roles.

Lord Bew: Since this is such a cross-cutting issue, do you think political parties should work together to combat the intimidation of candidates? For example, in working with the social media companies to report and take down intimidatory messages online? Is this an opportunity for parties to reach some consensus on their approach?

Aimee Challenor: Definitely, we are all candidates, all trying to support and represent our local communities, and come to a consensus. We should work with this Committee, and work with social media to support communities.

Monisha Shah: The Committee has received submissions from members of the public who argue that political parties and their key spokespeople do not set an appropriate tone for public debate, and this can promote an atmosphere where the intimidation of candidates can take place. Do you agree that political parties have a responsibility to show leadership in setting the tone for public debate?

Aimee Challenor: A very good point. They should be leading by example. We should be in a society where we teach to treat each other with respect. It comes from the top and bottom. Politics is toxic. A lot of campaigns involve negative campaigning. We need to see less of that to see a decrease in negative campaigning.

With respect to the Green Party, there is an executive, and a regional committee. We can recall leadership if they are bringing the Party into disrepute. There have been no difficulties with Caroline Lucas or our other Spokespeople.

There is a great division in the country and more needs to be done. Because of that division in society, politics is becoming more divisive.

Lord Bew: We are interested in how the social media companies interact with and support candidates. Did Facebook make contact with the Green Party?

Aimee Challenor: We had an email from Facebook, but it was more of a '*come and make a candidate page*'. We have had nothing from the social networks since.

Lord Bew: Thank you so much for attending this morning. The Committee is really very grateful to you for giving evidence and being willing to share your own experiences. Thank you.