**Quantitative Submissions on the Intimidation of Parliamentary Candidates**

An Internal Report prepared for the **Committee on Standards in Public Life**

**1. Introduction**

This report presents a summary of a number of submissions on the Intimidation of Parliamentary Candidates, to the Committee on Standards in Public Life. Collectively, these submissions touch on the use of political actors of social media, the intimidation experienced by MPs and the misogyny experienced by females within these contexts, also in contrast to their male counterparts.

**2. Using Social Media as a Political Actor: Potentially Overwhelming and Intimidating**

According to Demos, there are general problems political actors face when using social media. While social media do provide opportunities, there is a lower threshold for abuse than in face-to-face situations. Using social media can also be overwhelming for politicians, leaving them unable to respond to what they may perceive as ‘digital noise’, and this could damage their confidence in handling these platforms. Using a computer-assisted content analysis of about a million tweets, One of Demos’ conclusions is that MPs need technological solutions for managing their social media.

**3. The Online Intimidation of MPs**

MPs face intimidation, within their party and on social media. Professor Tim Bale1points out that besides the contributing factors of political alignment, polarisation, differing political cultures and Conservative incumbency, intimidation of MPs on social media of probably reflects members’ and supporters' respective access to, and interest in, social media as a campaign tool. The ESRC-funded Party Members Project looks, among other things, at the extent to which those members engage in a range of campaign activities. And it reveals, as he says, a “very marked difference between Conservative (and UKIP) grassroots’ members use of social media” and the use made of, say, Twitter and Facebook by Labour (and SNP) members. This, he believes, is primarily a function of age: parties with a greater proportion of older members, like the Tories and UKIP, will contain fewer digital natives, whereas parties with younger members, such as Labour and the SNP, will contain more. This isn’t the only thing making abuse more likely to come from the left than the right; but it may well be a big part of it.

Focusing on Twitter as one of these social media platforms and using computational methods like

Demos, Binns and Bateman (2017) have been capturing tweets as @messages to British MPs in December 2016 and focus on the millions of tweets sent between 18 March and 11 June. Using machine learning, they measure the emotion behind these tweets and find that:

* Some Scottish MPs received higher hostility levels, as the CON and LAB MPs are the sole representatives of parties in Scotland.
* A number of Corbyn critics have also experienced high levels of hostility.
* Hostility levels rise and fall with major political events
* High numbers of hostile tweets are usually part of a very busy feed.
* Although directly or indirectly threatening tweets are a very small percentage of the tweets sent (~0.1%), these are still likely to have more impact.

Perhaps surprisingly, she finds that there is little difference in hostility levels experienced by MPs by party, ethnicity or gender by percentage of total messages received.

Radio 5 Live conducted a survey of the abuse of MPs at the 2017 GE, with respondents from the CON, LAB, SNP and other parties. They present a list of numbers highlighting the abuse experienced during the campaign, from the general public or another political party:

* 3 out of 4 experienced verbal abuse
* The majority also experienced online abuse
* Almost 1 in 10 experienced physical abuse
* Almost half of them experienced physical abuse to any property
* About a third were upset by the abuse or not bothered, but 9 were extremely upset by it. The majority would, however, still recommend standing as a candidate to other people, regardless of the level of abuse.
* Almost half of the respondents think the level of abuse they received in that GE, compared to previous ones, is the worst they’ve experienced.
* About a third say it was comparable to other GEs.
* About 2 out of 3 believe that the level of abuse is higher for female candidates.

**4. MP Intimidation within the Party**

Professor Tim Bale2refers to the bitterness in the internal politics of the Labour Party. Some 3 out of 10 of those who joined the party after the 2015 general election had not voted Labour in that contest, generally preferring more left-wing alternatives, while nearly all of them are personally very loyal to Corbyn, with many wanting rid of those MPs who are not. He notes that 55% of post-2015 members believe that ‘Labour MPs who persistently and publicly criticise the leadership in the media should be deselected' - a proportion that rises to two-thirds (68%) of those who joined after Corbyn was elected leader. He observes that there are also big and bitter divisions on the question of antisemitism in the Labour Party, which he studied witha YouGov survey, fielded in May 2016 among 1031 Labour party members[[1]](#footnote-1). The Labour Party seems torn internally: almost a half believe antisemitism is a problem within the Labour party; the other half denies that it is the case. Many of the latter are newer,post-2015-GE members. In fact, a clear majority of them believe it is being hyped either to damage the party and its leader or to stifle criticism of Israel.

**5. The Intimidation of Female Candidates and VAWG**

Delmar et al. (2017) conducted a survey earlier this year, with members of both genders, of the CON, Lab, LibDem, SNP, Plaid Cymru, UKIP and Green parties as respondents and share the following (preliminary) findings about their experiences during the 2017 GE campaign:

* About 1 in 3 had already experienced some form of inappropriate behaviour
* CON candidates were more likely to report inappropriate behaviour than other candidates
* Women candidates were more likely to have experienced inappropriate behaviour
* Women of all ages receive abuse
* 3 out of 4 women candidates find abuse annoying, more than half are concerned (56%) and 1 out of 3 say they are fearful.
* Sending inappropriate emails and abuse on social media were the most common types of inappropriate behaviour. Physical attacks were rare.

The Fawcett Society has recently looked into the experience of women being harassed or abused online, the response of social media platforms to this harassment or abuse and of the men in local government, using an open-access survey online. They find that:

* There is more abuse on FB or Twitter: 2 out of 3 have experienced abuse or harassment, almost all of them from a stranger or both strangers and people they know in real life.
* Almost 2 in 3 reported abuse or harassment on Facebook, where women who answered the survey were more likely to have experienced abuse from people they know (slightly less than 1 in 3). Abuse on other platforms was rarer.
* Half of FB users who experienced abuse said they did not report it to the platform, and nor did 43% of Twitter users. When they did, few reported the platform taking action.

The Fawcett Society also reports on the consequences of this online intimidation for the representation of women in local government[[2]](#footnote-2). Their report is based on responses to an open survey distributed among 2300 local councillors, the result of a year-long commission. They note that women are underrepresented in local councils: only a third of the councillors are female, as has been the case for about 20 years. Women are less inclined to run for local office because of a fear of violence, abuse and harassment, online and offline. It is suggested that the local police and councils need to aid female candidates to mitigate these fears and risks which limit female engagement.

Amnesty International, in turn, investigated the extent of online abuse against 177 women MPs active on Twitter between 1 January and 8 June 2017. Like Binns (2017) they looked at tweets, analysing almost one million of them, and uncovered the following:

* Especially BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) women face an extraordinary amount of abuse on social media. Excluding Diane Abbott, black and Asian women MPs – despite representing only 11% of all women in Westminster – received 35% more abusive tweets than white women MPs.
* Online abuse against women MPs is often sexist or misogynistic and intersectional. Women MPs from racial, ethnic or religious minorities experienced targeted abuse based on their different identities, in addition to the abuse based on their gender.
* No women MP has been free from online intimidation.
* The online abuse cuts across political party lines.

Most alarmingly, this report mentions that there is a real danger that high levels of online abuse against women MPs will have a chilling effect on women taking part in public life – particularly women of colour, since the abuse has a psychological impact on the women who receive it: it damages confidence and self-esteem and may result in women self-censoring themselves online.

Interestingly, in contrast to these reports on gender-specific differences in the intimidation of political actors, Binns (2017) finds that there is little difference in hostility levels perceived based on gender. However, she links this finding to the fact that white men are more likely to be higher profile, front bench, Scottish or in a group of prominent Corbyn critics. In addition, this report raises the concern that as women react more strongly to online abuse, they are more likely to change their behaviour because of it. That being said, MPs’ responses to hostility online varies greatly. Some will be extremely upset, others see it as part of the job and one or two seem to actively ‘court it’.

Considering VAWG and the types and interpretations of online abuse of women more specifically, Lewis, Rowe and Wiper (2016)used a survey as well as 17 in-depth interviews to investigate the nature, patterns and impacts of the abuse feminists are subjected to, as well as their responses to it. They find that:

* Abuse is very commonly experienced among this group of self-selected respondents
* There is a continuum of (the impact of) online abuse
* Experience of multiple types of abuse is common
* This abuse was understood as an attempt to silence them

However, most women felt in some way galvanised by their experience and 54% agreed it made them more determined in their political views. A third agreed it made them feel motivated to continue to engage in debate. Thus, instead of silencing the women, the abuse galvanised participation in this form of civic life.

**6. Conclusion**

This report refers to 11 quantitative submissions to the Committee on Standards in Public Life on the topic of the intimidation of parliamentary candidates. These submissions reflect concerns with the use of political actors of social media, the intimidation of parliamentary actors on social media and within their parties and the intimidation of female parliamentary candidates/MPs. Based on this evidence it is clear that parliamentary candidates experience intimidation and especially if they happen to be part of a specific party that is under attack or where there is a culture of intimidation, and this particularly so in case they are female.

**7. References**

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**8. List of submission authors**

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| **Resp. #** | **Author** | **Article or Institution/Oganisation** |
| 87 | A. Krasodomski-Jones | Demos |
| 13 | Prof. Mike Rowe | [BJC Article] |
| 13 | Prof. Mike Rowe | [Misogyny Online] |
| 62 | Amy Binns | Senior lecturer, journalism division, University of Central Lancashire |
| 69 | - | The Fawcett Society, the UK’s leading charity campaigning for gender equality and women’s rights at work, at home, and in public life. |
| 80 | Prof. Tim Bale1 | Part 1, letter to Lord Bew |
| 80 | Prof. Tim Bale2 | Part 2, Submission to the Chakrabarti Inquiry on behalf of the ESRC Party Members Project, 3 June 2016 |
| 84 | Dr. Ruth Lewis, Prof. Mike Rowe, Clare Wiper | Article excerpt |
| 87 | Kasia Staszweska | Amnesty International |
| 89 | Dr. Jennifer Hudson | Delmar, S.C., Hudson, J., Rüdig, & Campbell, R. (19 September 2017). Inappropriate Behaviour:  Experiences of 2017 Parliamentary Candidates Evidence from the Representative Audit of Britain Study (ESRC – ES/M500410/1) |
| 91 | - | Radio 5 Live |

1. It was in an earlier survey, fielded in May 2016, with 2,026 respondents who are registered supporters of the Labour party and joined after May 2015, that he had already found that that feelings on Israel/Palestine run so high sometimes that they shade into antisemitism in their internal debate (Bale1). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This report on whether local government works for women can be found here: <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/does-local-government-work-for-women-final-report-of-the-local-government-commission> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Corresponding author [↑](#footnote-ref-3)