**Committee on Standards in Public Life**

**Intimidation of Parliamentary Candidates Review**

**Public Hearing: Political Parties**

**Thursday 14 September 2017**

**3.44 pm**

**Committee members present: Lord Bew (Chairman); Sheila Drew Smith OBE; Simon Hart MP; Dr Jane Martin CBE; Jane Ramsey; Monisha Shah; Rt Hon Lord Stunell OBE.**

**Witnesses: Baroness Brinton (President, Liberal Democrat Party); Ian Lavery MP (Chair, Labour Party); Rt Hon Sir Patrick McLoughlin MP (Chair, Conservative Party).**

**The Chairman:** I want to thank you very much for coming. We know how busy you are, and we are very grateful for the help that you are giving our Committee this afternoon on this difficult and contentious issue. We are not, of course, a parliamentary Select Committee but an independent body with an independent remit, and we are working hard to produce an objective view of what has become a difficult problem in our public life.

All the members of the Committee are here except for Margaret Beckett MP, who cannot be here today but has been attending and, indeed, was at our meetings the day before yesterday on this subject. Otherwise, what you see before you is the Committee on Standards in Public Life.

This is a public session; it is being recorded, and a transcript will be published on our website. The Committee will ask questions, and all witnesses are invited to comment on the themes raised. We want to finish on time, so we would be grateful if the responses were kept brief. I know that that is difficult, because some of the questions that we will touch on today are of some complexity. I am asking for a favour in asking for that. Could I briefly ask the witnesses to introduce themselves and comment briefly on their role? Perhaps, as I know you, Baroness Brinton, we could start with your end of the table.

**Baroness Brinton (President, Liberal Democrats):** Thank you. I am the elected president of the Liberal Democrats, and I chair the party's federal board. I have been a parliamentary candidate.

**Ian Lavery MP (Chairman, Labour Party):** I am Ian Lavery, the newly appointed chairman of the Labour Party, Member of Parliament for Wansbeck in the north-east of England and a member of the shadow Cabinet.

**Rt Hon Sir Patrick McLoughlin MP (Chairman, Conservative Party):** I am Patrick McLoughlin, Member of Parliament for Derbyshire Dales, chairman of the Conservative Party and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

**Jane Ramsey:** The Committee has received evidence that some of those involved in intimidation are party members. In your view, what responsibility do political parties have to moderate the behaviour of their members who engage in the intimidation of parliamentary candidates?

**Baroness Brinton:** Clearly, we believe that it is important that the party has a role as a member organisation in upholding the standards of that organisation. One thing that we have done in the past four years is to appoint a pastoral care officer who has a dual function of supporting people inside the party who believe that they have been the victim of a problem, and that includes parliamentary candidates. She is also the first point of complaint for outsiders. She has been monitoring complaints that we have had about members of our party who may be intimidating or taking other forms of action against not just parliamentary candidates but members of other parties. The federal board receives reports from her, so we are watching with interest how the nature of complaints has changed and the nature of intimidation and harassment as well. We have seen steady progress since 2014 in the number of complaints.

**Ian Lavery MP:** The Labour Party believes this to be extremely important. I would like to place on record, first of all, that I think you are doing a fantastic job and say how important this actually is. It is so important in today’s political age. The party itself is responsible for the rule book, and the rule book of the Labour Party is very specific about the way in which people are treated and the way in which we expect members of the party to treat other members of political parties and indeed the general public. We will not accept in any way, shape or form anti-Semitism, intimidation, harassment or bullying. We have associated codes of conduct with respect to that.

We place great emphasis on the need for respect, regardless of people's views. There is a real need to understand in a parliamentary democracy— inside Parliament and outside it—the need not necessarily to agree with people but to respect and listen to their different views. We have codes of conduct; we have new codes of conduct coming into place as well, as a result of what has been happening. Sincerely, we do not just expect members to follow the rules, ambitions and aims of the party but instruct them that that must be the case.

**Jane Ramsey:** When does the new code of conduct come into effect?

**Ian Lavery MP:** We are looking at a number of reports that are continually being published, and we will look at recommendations from them and try to bring things together. Things have been escalating with regard to intimidation and bullying, particularly in relation to women, and we need to look at that. Things have changed and are still changing, and, although one of the latest reports suggests that it is currently being maintained and is on the wane, we have a responsibility to make sure that we get it up to date and right for parliamentary candidates and the general public, so that there is an expectation of respect for everyone concerned.

**Rt Hon Sir Patrick McLoughlin MP:** Like the previous two parties, we have a code of conduct. It is on our website what needs to be done and the way in which one should treat people with respect. It is not dissimilar to what I have heard. We also have a senior member of staff who is responsible for dealing with complaints, and those are monitored regularly by the deputy chairman of the party, Amanda Sater, who keeps a complete eye on the issue.

We take it seriously. When you are dealing with a lot of party members across the country, there will be occasions when some go on the wrong side of what is acceptable, and that needs to be dealt with and, I hope, is dealt with very satisfactorily.

**Baroness Brinton:** If we are covering codes of conduct, could I add a couple of points? We have a code of conduct for members, and we have another code of conduct for our approved candidates who are applying for parliamentary seats and then for while they are parliamentary candidates. One thing that we have done in recent years is to be clear about the range of sanctions available when members or parliamentary candidates have breached the code. Part of that might be immediate suspension and expulsion, but it might be retraining or a denial of permission to stand for public office or office in the party for a period until the party is confident that somebody was able to do it. The people who run our disciplinary process understand the range of sanctions available.

**Rt Hon Lord Stunell OBE:** From the codes and evidence that you have submitted it is obvious that each of the parties has its own approach. The pressure point, I guess, is particularly at election times. How quick and nimble do you think your processes are in those situations as well as in the general run of play? What are the advantages of your approach? Did you consider alternative approaches, perhaps?

**Rt Hon Sir Patrick McLoughlin MP:** I think that there are cases where things are drawn to your attention and you can take immediate action, pending a further investigation. Obviously, in a general election, because of everything else that is going on, the timescales are a bit more awkward, but, where there are obvious cases where there are allegations, we are in a position, if somebody has said something that we can see and is proven, to take very fast action. I can get it confirmed in due course if I need to by the party board, but quite often that is not necessary.

**Ian Lavery MP:** The fact that the last election was a snap election caused great problems with tightness of time. There were lots of complaints from our parties: from the Conservative Party against Labour and from Labour against the Conservatives. It did not really give us a lot of time to look at these issues, bearing in mind that, during an election period, the only thing on the mind of our parties is to win the election. It has caused lots of problems, by the way, because we still have a number of complaints outstanding, and we are dealing with them as quickly as we can.

We are working on implementing what we call the “one-stop shop”, which is a new unit that will, we hope, guarantee the swiftest of responses that we can make to all complaints. We look at the complaints from members to see whether there is anything that could be seen as prejudicial or classed as grossly detrimental to the party. If there is something that is detrimental to the party, that is really important. We would immediately look at that, and we did so at the time. There is a range of sanctions that we would consider, right from a formal warning for an individual to immediate suspension pending a full hearing in investigation hearings. We have that in place. We also have lots of other internal procedures for dealing with abuse and intimidation that we are reviewing. We have improved significantly. I mentioned before looking at other reports: the Shami Chakrabarti report on anti-Semitism, for example, made a number of recommendations, and we are taking heed of what was said in that report.

In 2016, the National Executive Committee (NEC) passed a social media policy. I think that it is in the written submission, Lord Bew, that we handed out. That outlined the expectation on the membership to treat people like I explained before, without going through it again. That is part of the package. We are dealing with things. We are setting up a one-stop shop. We want complaints dealt with immediately, and we want the people who are receiving this abuse to have as much support as we can give them at the correct time.

**Baroness Brinton:** I absolutely agree that we also have a spike in incidents in the run-up to a general election—that is not surprising—both where our candidates hit problems or where we receive complaints. We took the decision some elections ago to suspend any disciplinary processes during a general election, because a quasi-judicial system cannot be rushed or cheated on. As a result, there is a small unit that works with our compliance department during a general election to assess how serious something is and whether the member concerned should be suspended until that disciplinary process picks up. In this election, that worked very well for us.

One illustration of that was a member who said on Twitter during the election about his local Tory MP that they should not be spared the noose. I am saying this because it was in the public domain. That member was immediately suspended and, immediately after the election, expelled. He then had his right of appeal under our disciplinary process: it was not granted.

We had another case during the general election where somebody made an inflammatory LGBT statement. They had just got completely out of their depth in an interview on television, which they were not used to. She apologised afterwards, and she has agreed that she will stand down from our approved candidates list because it is inappropriate for her to continue.

I cite those as illustrations of how there was an immediate response during the election period but, immediately after, the party’s systems picked up and dealt with it appropriately rather than slightly rushing things.

**Dr Jane Martin:** Can I stay with that? My question is a simple one, but you have pre-empted it. We are focusing on the 2017 general election, and I accept what Mr Lavery said about the circumstances around that. We would be interested to know whether any members of your parties were disciplined for the intimidation of candidates during that election. Are you in a position to say how many? Indeed, how many cases were not then a matter for disciplinary action?

**Baroness Brinton:** I am not in charge of those. We have a federal system in the party, and discipline is dealt with by each of the state parties. I am aware of a handful—probably five or six—where they got to formal panel interviews, but, in quite a lot of cases, people resigned from the party having realised they had gone too far. The party system in that case, by the way, is that a note remains on file should they wish to rejoin the party, so they cannot just resign and rejoin later: we would review that case at that point.

**Ian Lavery MP:** I do not have the figures in front of me—I was not party chairman at the time—but I am of the view that a number of people were disciplined for different reasons, including intimidation, bullying and harassment, particularly people who were on social media. A whole number of people who were, allegedly, Labour supporters were subsequently not allowed to join the party because of issues that had been raised and things that had been said that would constitute a breach of rules, basically. There was a whole number of people in the process and not just in the lead-up to the election, as, I am sure, you will understand. We have had two leadership elections as well, and there has been intimidation, bullying and harassment from all sides. The party has taken what it saw as appropriate action against anybody who, it believed, was acting in that way. I am not sure about the facts and figures with regard to that, but, if possible, I will get some facts and figures for you.

*4.00 pm*

**Dr Jane Martin**: I am sure that that would be helpful. Thank you.

**Rt Hon Sir Patrick McLoughlin MP**: Dr Martin, with the Chair’s permission, I think that I need to write to you on that issue and clarify, rather than trying to give an estimate. I would rather be more accurate in providing, so I will come back to you with that, if I may.

**The Chairman:** Thank you very much. Simon, you may have a debate to go to, so can you come in at this point?

**Simon Hart MP**: Thank you. There is no doubt that we have heard from everybody that the rise of social media has altered the nature in which campaigns seem to take place these days. There is nothing particularly new about intimidation, but there is quite a lot new about online intimidation. We have all seen the submissions that the parties have made around guidelines to candidates and the sanctions that run alongside those, but I wondered, as an extension to the previous question, what the parties are doing as a measure of success? What is your measurement of success on whether the guidelines are having some bite?

**Rt Hon Sir Patrick McLoughlin MP**: That is a difficult question to give a direct answer to, because we are looking back at what happened in a general election campaign. We are not in a general election campaign now. Certainly, from what I saw and heard going around talking to candidates, the level of intimidation that people felt was taking place was much higher than I had previously experienced, and this was the ninth general election and the tenth parliamentary election that I had taken part in. I think that the level of vandalism, particularly against posters, was something that I had never witnessed before, as far as Conservative posters were concerned. I am not sure if the other parties suffered the kind of disruption that we saw. Most of the posters in my constituency were torn down or defaced. That is something that we need to try to make sure is not part of any future campaign. It is not just posters; there is also the evidence that I have submitted on behalf of the party to the Committee, in which we have made some suggestions, particularly around social media, as to where we think improvements can be made.

**Ian Lavery MP**: We have to look at how brutal this was. That is one of the reasons why this is a really important Committee, looking at a really important issue. We had abuse like nobody has seen before. I will mention Diane Abbott by name. One of the companies did a survey of posts on Twitter, and there were—my figures will be nearly right—188,000 abusive tweets during a given time. Diane Abbott received 45% of those 188,000. Women in general took the lion’s share of this horrendous abuse on Twitter.

Individual parties have to take responsibility with regard to this. What we have done, as I have mentioned, is that we have a social media pledge. We have a social media policy. We give support to members of different communities if they are subject to abuse. It is torrid; this abuse is 24/7. It is not something that you can walk away from. When you go home, it is there with you and your kids. This abuse is constant. It is very difficult for the parties, actually, because of the fact that you can get on to Twitter and say that you are Mr Simon Hart MP, although you are not, and can say some of the most outrageous things the vast majority of time. You cannot really get to understand who people are.

**Simon Hart MP**: What you have said so far has been very specific to candidates and members. Do you feel restricted in any way that your reach cannot extend beyond that? Some of the examples of abuse that were evident during the election campaign came from third-party organisations and groups of people who might not be members and might not be candidates but are still operating in the name of political parties—and pretty vociferously. Do you just have to shrug your shoulders?

**Ian Lavery MP:** No. I understand the point you are making, but you cannot at any time shrug your shoulders and say, “We can’t do anything”.

**Simon Hart MP:** What do you do?

**Ian Lavery MP:** During the election, there were numerous times when the Labour Party, for example, was asked to call out certain people, and, on numerous occasions, the leader of the Labour Party made public statements on Twitter, Facebook, with the press and in the media basically reiterating the rules and reiterating that the Labour Party would not in any way, shape or form support these third parties, as you put it. We would never shrug our shoulders—this is too important an issue—but I must say again at this stage that the press played a huge role in this. They are not angels in this. They stirred up racial hatred and they stirred up political hatred right the way through the election, before the election and since the election. That causes problems. We do everything we can.

I have mentioned before the issue we have with regard to the policies to which we expect people to adhere. We give support to the people we know, and we use everything we can to denounce this monstrous, unacceptable behaviour. The keyboard warriors go on to Facebook or Twitter. Some of the things said against the LGBT community or relating to anti-Semitism or female candidates are absolutely outrageous. There is the sexism: nearly every female MP in this great House will, during her time, be threatened and abused on Twitter about rape. We cannot shrug our shoulders with regard to that.

**Simon Hart MP:** So the three parties will be able to supply the Committee with statistics relating to people who have been sanctioned as a result of that.

**Ian Lavery MP:** As I said in response to the question from Dr Martin, as far as the Labour Party is concerned, I will try to get as many statistics as I can, and I am sure that we will supply to the Committee whatever we have. It is very important.

**Rt Hon Sir Patrick McLoughlin MP:** I have one point that, I think, is important. Ian has rightly talked about candidates. I want the Committee also to have it in mind that it is not just candidates; it is the families of candidates too. As candidates, we are part of a robust debate—that will always be the case—but the families of candidates do not deserve the kind of opprobrium that they have seen. It is, in a way, unfortunate that there is a debate taking place in the Chamber at the moment on exactly this issue, but I understand that we had set this up for some time. There have been some good examples in the bit of the debate that I heard earlier of how family members have been brought into the debate.

**Sheila Drew Smith:** May I follow on the point that you made about the potential impact on the families? We have had evidence that the intimidation also occurs at local elections, not just in a parliamentary context, and, more widely, affects holders of public office. I wondered how far you had addressed the issues as parties. How far do the helpful codes of conduct and frameworks that you have described extend to cover that wider group in the community?

**Rt Hon Sir Patrick McLoughlin MP:** From my point of view, the code of conduct does not apply just at general elections; it applies to conduct as a member of the party throughout a period. It is not something that you want to be there just at a general election; you are a representative for that party all of the time. If you are a member of the party and are doing it in a party position, you are accountable all the time.

**Baroness Brinton:** We have a social media guide for all members of the party that is refreshed and sent out through member newsletters, and we now run training courses at our party conferences. They are partly under the guise of how to give yourself a social media profile, but a large element of that is about disagreeing well and public discourse, One thing that we have discovered through monitoring some of the complaints that have come and watching the dialogue that has happened on social media prior to the point where someone has made a comment that was unacceptable—I think we have all seen it; you will have seen it as well—is the egging each other on. You have two sides trying to up the ante the whole time. It is as if, in the discourse, people go down a rabbit hole and cannot get back out of it. Our candidates, when they have been on the receiving end of that, have found it very difficult, and sometimes they have gone farther than they should have done. We are determined to tackle that through training and support.

**Ian Lavery MP:** In addition to what I have already explained, we have rule changes recommended by the NEC for this year’s annual conference, again based on what has been happening over the past few years, particularly the last year or so. We are looking to recommend rule changes with regard to protecting people from abuse involving prejudice against a protected characteristic and any form of intimidation or bullying. That is relevant not just to females, the LGBT community and BME candidates but to everybody who is defined as having a protected characteristic under the Equality Act. We have that up for a rule change at the national conference this year. In addition, as I have mentioned, we provide one-to-one support for individuals who are being bullied, harassed and intimidated at all levels through the regions and the nations. We continually provide that support.

**Sheila Drew Smith:** That is very helpful. Each of you has described the codes of conduct or similar that you have put in place and the frameworks that you have established. I would be interested to hear— maybe it is not for today; you can supply further information—about what happens on the ground when somebody is intimidated. We all know and understand the immediacy of social media. You can have excellent codes of conduct, but I wonder what happens on the ground when a candidate for national or local election feels intimidated.

**Baroness Brinton:** In our party, they know that their first port of call is our pastoral care officer. She is obviously not on duty 24 hours a day, but she will respond pretty quickly. In an emergency, she will respond as soon as she can. She has even responded on holiday, because she is very trusted by members and it is understood that she will deal with it. She will get professional advice. She has a professional healthcare background, so, in cases where there is a threat of sexual assault and things like that, she is extremely careful in the advice that she gives. She will support people and encourage them to go to the police if that is the appropriate route.

Our compliance unit will talk to people who are alleged to have committed offences, whether they are criminal or just breach the party’s code of conduct. They, too, are warned about their behaviour and are given support to make sure that they monitor email or social media advice on other things as well.

Could I make one comment about local government, given that you referred to it?

**The Chairman:** That would be helpful.

**Baroness Brinton:** There is one thing that would help some of our women council candidates enormously, and it may well be broader than that. MPs are allowed to have on their nomination papers “living in the constituency” or “address outside the constituency”: that is not permitted in local government elections. I have at least two women who will not be standing in elections next year because they are not allowed to put that, even though they were parliamentary candidates this year. That must be changed.

**The Chairman:** I am glad that you came in on that point.

**Jane Ramsey:** Since this is clearly affecting all political parties, are you working in a cross-cutting way on the issue, particularly perhaps on trying to combat the intimidation of candidates by reporting things jointly to social media companies or working collectively in a cross-cutting way at all?

*4.15 pm*

**Ian Lavery MP:** With regard to that, I did not get the chance to respond before, but I will answer it at this stage—with brevity. The Labour Party has not had cross-party talks with other parties with regard to intimidation, bullying and harassment. The reason for that is probably that there has been a bit of a stand-off. I want to be absolutely truthful about this. The Conservative Party has attacked the Labour Party, and the Labour Party has attacked the Conservative Party. I am not trying to score points; that is not what we are here for. There has been an almighty row about the level of abuse maybe from, as Mr Hart said, third parties. There has not been that—how can I put it?—thought that we should get together and work it through, because we all have our own problems to resolve before we can sit down in cross-party talks. We would welcome the opportunity, if we thought it would be fruitful and helpful, to sit with the other political parties, talk this through and, we hope, come to some sort of resolution—perhaps a joint code of practice. Who knows? There has been that stand-off; that is the reality.

**Rt Hon Sir Patrick McLoughlin MP:** First, on Baroness Brinton’s point, I think that I made the point about election addresses for local candidates in the written submission that we put before the Committee.

What Mr Lavery says is interesting. There are things that the parties could do—perhaps we should look at that—but there is the issue, which is a bit more worrying, of the third parties and social media, which is not necessarily something that the parties alone can deal with. We have to look to the Digital Economy Act and possible ways in the code of conduct that can come from that Act. If the Committee outlined some areas where it had recommendations on that, that would help us to ensure that those things are covered as far as the code of conduct is concerned, when it is eventually published.

**Monisha Shah:** Bearing in mind what you have just said, it will not come as a surprise that the Committee has received submissions from members of the public who argue that political parties and your key spokespeople do not set an appropriate tone for public debate and that that promotes an atmosphere in which 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? What are your respective parties doing towards that?

**Ian Lavery MP:** Without starting a mass brawl at the table here, of course I agree with you. It is really important that not just Members of Parliament but people in public office act appropriately. As I mentioned before, you have to treat people with respect and be part of that. Leadership is extremely important in all of this. We saw different parties acting quite differently at the last election. I am on about political parties at the top level. Jeremy Corbyn, for example, was completely different in the way in which he approached things with regard to Theresa May. There was a completely different approach. Some people argued that the Conservative Party, apart from Patrick, of course, returned to the nasty old party. Jeremy’s approach was quite different.

The question is essential: if people see leading representatives, regardless of the colour—red, yellow or blue—acting in a wholly unacceptable way that is discourteous, whether it is bullying, intimidation or abuse, they believe that that is normal in debate. That cannot be allowed to happen. It has happened with other parties that are not represented around the table this afternoon. Racial abuse has happened, and, to be honest, they have not been brought to book for it.

It is an absolute necessity that political parties and people who have been elected to political office act in the right and proper manner, as befits the position that they have been elected to. We are seen as leaders, and we should act like leaders in the communities that we represent.

**Baroness Brinton:** It is absolutely right that the way our leaders—not just our party leaders but our senior spokespeople—speak has to set the tone. I think that there is also something that none of the political parties does at the moment, and I will explain why. We very rarely apologise when either the tone has been wrong from a senior person or some incidents have happened with members. That is because the first thing that happens is that the other parties start to attack you. There is a sort of immediate, “We are not going to go there because it will damage us.” I really like the idea of a small group of very senior people in the parties coming together to discuss things like a common framework. What parties do about sanctions is up to them, but it would be extremely useful to have that as a helpline.

I speak from personal experience. I was stalked/harassed in my seat in Watford. The person who did it was caught after two and half years: he was my Conservative opponent. We had tried in the preceding months to talk to the Conservative Party locally and nationally and had got absolutely nowhere, partly because people would not believe that it was happening. If there had been a dialogue been going on between the parties, that debate could have happened. He was finally convicted of five crimes, with 68 others taken into account. It was pretty serious and it was unusual, but we still have had nothing at all back to say that the party has learned from that.

I know that the other two parties will be able to cite similar stories from other directions, but the reason that I say this is that one way that we can start to cut through this is by having a mechanism to do it. At the moment, picking up the phone to the leader’s office in somebody else’s party in the middle of a general election and expecting something to happen is jolly difficult when there is an air war going on and you are fighting each other. There is a practical way in which we can move forward.

**Rt Hon Sir Patrick McLoughlin MP***:* There have been times when, before an election, the parties have agreed certain standards. To my knowledge, that has happened in general elections in the past. What you want to protect in an election campaign is robust debate between the parties—that is necessary so that the issues can be exposed and argued on—but, certainly, I take the point that all parties have a role in making sure that language is of the right temper.

**The Chairman**: Thank you very much indeed. I want to raise one final question with all of you, as we have just a couple of minutes left.

Monisha’s question reflected one type of letter that we have received since the opening of the inquiry, the letter that says, “They are setting a bad example—the politicians themselves—and that is part of the problem.” I want to check something with you, because I think that it was implicit in everything that you said. There is another type of letter that will probably surprise you; it certainly surprised me. It is a minority, but those letters say, “Actually, there is no new special problem. It has always been a rough trade, and what we have is a new group of unusually thin-skinned persons in political life.” I want to get your take broadly on that. It is, by the way, a minority of those who have written to us, but there were rather more letters like that than I had expected.

**Rt Hon Sir Patrick McLoughlin MP***:* From my point of view, having personally fought nine general elections, I think that some of the stories that I heard this time went quite substantially beyond that. Of course, there has always been proper debate during a general election campaign, but some of the things that I have been told and some of the evidence that, I know, has been submitted to the Committee by candidates is, I think, not reflective of the rough and tumble of debate that we have seen in the past. A number of people whom I have known who have fought elections have made the same point, so I think there has been a move.

As I said, just in my constituency there was more vandalism of posters than I have ever witnessed. OK, posters do not really hurt anybody, but I think there was a higher level in this campaign than there was before. I think of the intrusiveness of social media—I come back to what we said earlier—and particularly the effects that that can have on families, who do not deserve to be in any way part of the abuse that has been suffered.

**Ian Lavery MP:** If you are a politician, it is fair to say, it is a dirty business. It is worth saying. If you want to be an MP, you have to be prepared to be criticised. What is not acceptable is what has developed in the past few years with the progress of social media—Facebook, Twitter. That is where a lot of the problems have come from, and I think that it has changed.

I do not mind being criticised—it is part of the game—but I really resent somebody who, while we have no clue who they are, can say they are somebody else on Facebook, Twitter or Snapchat and say anything they want about you. It can circulate to millions of people. That is one of the huge problems.

Patrick mentioned something really important, which is that we need to look at the rules, regulations and legislation with regard to who can do this. With a lot of the MPs, as I mentioned before, it is not just the individuals; it is their families. Their kids see these things about their parents on Twitter. It is devastating for them, and then the people at school read these things.

There has been a big change from the rough and tumble of the debates where we argue that black is white and say, “You are wrong, and that is why we are right”. That still has its place, and it is really important. It is the debates that are taking place that we have absolutely no control over at all, and that is social networking. That is a real difficulty for anybody in public office.

**The Chairman:** Baroness Brinton, I want you to come in on this, partly as a response to what you said just a couple of minutes ago. We have a particular concern—everybody has mentioned it—that women and people from ethnic minorities get a harder time. Is there any specific thing that could be done to help?

**Baroness Brinton:** I was about to expand my answer to cover that point from our perspective. I would take issue, with the greatest respect to Ian, with the phrase “dirty business”, which I do not like. It almost legitimises the discourse that is going on. We seem to have lost in this country in the past 15 to 20 years the ability to disagree well. I would love that phrase to start to come back into use. We can have robust debate, but it is about the level of personal abuse and deliberately trying to undermine people. It is part of the problem about democracy and why people disregard politicians, why we are always top of the hate list, all those things. We seem to have just forgotten how to have that public disagreement well.

What do we do about it in our party? Partly because of my experience and our experience of losing good women candidates, we developed resilience training. We started it for our women candidates only. It is one of the core competencies that we use to assess whether people can go on to our approved list. After they are on the approved list, there is further resilience training in their preparation to be a parliamentary candidate. That proved extremely useful, and we are now trying to expand it elsewhere.

That might be the response to this—“You are standing for public office. Lots of things will happen to you. You have to learn how to handle difficult people, whether they are inside or outside the party”—but the extra element of social media needs managing.

There are three very brief points we would make. If there is an ability to strengthen the Malicious Communications Act, putting the onus on social media companies to remove threads much more quickly, that would be helpful.

*4.30 pm*

The other point, which was made to me by my colleague Christine Jardine, who is the MP for Edinburgh West and was a particular target in this election, is that there is a big issue about the anonymity and traceability of posters, particularly when people make defamatory remarks. In Scotland, there are rules about the printed word, and she wondered whether that needed to be looked at. I understand that, in Scotland, once you have more than 500 followers, that is a trigger for the police to look at something as being defamatory. However, at the moment, it is perfectly possible for someone to post with a false name and no traceability. It could be extremely serious and, what is more, set off other people, and there is no recourse at all.

**The Chairman:** I just want to give Sir Patrick and Ian a chance if they want to come back on any of these points or indeed to say one final word.

**Rt Hon Sir Patrick McLoughlin MP:** No, I do not want to come back on what Baroness Brinton said; it is an interesting point that she makes about the number. I thank the Committee for the work that it is doing and look forward to seeing its report. You are getting a lot of information, as I understand it, so that you can see where this happens. We need to make sure that we move forward on this with as much consensual agreement as possible.

**Ian Lavery MP:** I thank the Committee for the work that it is doing. It is extremely important at this point in time. The problems have been explained by the three representatives. There are different points, but, in the main, it is the same really important issues. Thanks very much.

**The Chairman:** We are extremely grateful. We know how busy you are. You have promised us further information, but, if there is anything else that you want to raise or, on reflection, there is a point that requires stress, we will be very glad to hear from you. Deep thanks on behalf of the Committee.