

Committee on Standards in Public Life

Roundtable discussion: Review into intimidation of Parliamentary candidates

Tuesday 12 September 2017 at 2 pm

Committee members present:

Lord Bew, Rt Hon Dame Margaret Beckett DBE MP, Sheila Drew Smith OBE, Simon Hart MP, Dr Jane Martin CBE, Jane Ramsey, Monisha Shah

Roundtable members present:

Professor Tim Bale	Queen Mary, University of London
Rt Hon Sir Kevin Barron MP	House of Commons
Professor Rosie Campbell	Birkbeck, University of London
Professor Neil Chakraborti	University of Leicester
James Davies	BCS
David Evans	BCS
Adam Finkel-Gates	
Claire Foster-Gilbert	Westminster Abbey Institute
Dr Jennifer vanHeerde-Hudson	University College London (UCL)
Dr Ruth Lewis	University of Northumbria
Alasdair MacDonald	EHRC
Joy Morrissey	Women2Win
Fiyaz Mughal	TellMAMA
Dr Victoria Nash	Oxford Internet Institute
Professor Mark Philp	Chair, CSPL Research Advisory Board
Rt Hon Peter Riddell CBE	Commissioner for Public Appointments
Lisa Robillard Webb	
Dr Jonathan Rose	De Montfort University
Josh Smith	Demos
Dr Mark Shephard	University of Strathclyde
Kasia Staszewska	Amnesty International
Danny Stone	Anti-Semitism Policy Trust

Lord Bew: Thank you all very much for coming. I have been reminded not to start on Irish time, which is my rather bad habit, and instead to start at something approximate to English time. I am sorry there has been a bit of a cluster in getting up to the room. I am very happy to see you all here today because we, the Committee on Standards in Public Life, have an interesting problem, which is that the Prime Minister has asked us to look at the issue of intimidation and public life, not just at candidates about the election. We as a committee are determined to do what we can to defend civility in British public life. The committee's function as an independent non-partisan committee is to defend the Nolan principles regarding British public life, but actually those principles are not really operative without a successful functioning parliamentary liberal democracy alongside them. If you look at some of the Nolan principles, any dictator can claim to be honest, full of objectivity and so on. While it is the case that these principles should be promoted in public life, they require alongside them a successful liberal democracy.

We have come to the conclusion, in the work we have carried out so far, that we have a special problem in recent times in and around the issue of intimidation, which we are looking at not simply as to the question of whether or not people might leave public life that we need in public life but also the impact generally of certain types of intimidation on certain types of public debate, so in some ways we are thinking about a wider question as well.

We have some very eloquent letters in the office from people saying, "They're all namby-pambies nowadays. When I stood for office 20 years ago, I can tell you what happened: it was rough". Some of these letters are very well written and forceful, but the balance of evidence that we have received is that we cannot go with the "namby-pamby" thesis and there is a special problem. We are determined to be nonpartisan and objective in the way that we do this. The committee is independent. That is why we need the help of those of you who are in this room today. We are very keen to hear your thoughts. We want to know what can be done, what your views are on the changing tone of political debate, and what the responsibilities of individuals, political parties in Parliament and social media companies are in this context. I will not be chairing the session. Jane Ramsey, who has been doing a lot of the work on these issues, will be chairing it, so I will hand over to her.

Jane Ramsey: Thank you. Thanks again to everyone who is participating. Sorry about the absence of water; it is on its way, running not on Irish time but on Cabinet Office time. On the theme of time, obviously you are all experts in your own different ways and we are very keen to hear from you. We would be very grateful if you, and we on the committee, all focused on the themes set out in the agenda, which you will have received. We are interested in understanding the nature of the problem, the impact of social media and the broader effects that these have on public life. A bit more about logistics: we will be live-tweeting, so feel free. The meeting is on the record and there will be a transcript that will be published on the website. If you want to have a discussion about that in the comments that you have made, talk to Maggie, who is already tweeting at the back of the room. I would be grateful if everyone could state their name and briefly what their interest is in the subject.

Before we start, I should say that our current definition of intimidation is, "Words or behaviour intended or likely to block participation in public life". Although this review focuses on parliamentary candidates, we are also considering, receiving evidence from and talking to others in public life, both candidates for public office and other

public office holders. On my left is Professor Mark Philp, who will be contributing and helping us to steer the debate and make sure that we are focusing.

The first question is: we have a wealth of varied roles and experiences in the room, and we are very interested in hearing your understanding of the nature and scale of the problem of intimidation during election campaigns. Who would like to start?

Lisa Robillard Webb: I can. I am chair of a Labour Party in central Devon. I was also a parliamentary candidate; I have stood for election 13 times and dismally failed each time. I am here today because my experience in the general election was of a party member, who purports to be in my local party, tweeting regularly and saying very controversial and sometimes abusive things to other people. The impact that that has on myself and my local party is that it paralyses us in our campaigning, because he is able to tweet to an audience who believe what he is saying. It is then very hard for us, because we do not have the means, to recompense that. The abusive side to myself is that he regularly talks about me, which I am alerted to by party members late at night by emails and telephone calls. He has a history of violence and mental illness but he stays the right side of the law with his vocabulary. When I brought a complaint, the police told me to “phone 999 if I can”, which frightened the hell out of me. That is why I am here today. My party is underresourced and not developed enough to handle this situation. He has now been suspended but continues with his abuse online. I do not think our society has caught up yet. We do not seem to have the devices or funding. That is my experience.

Jane Ramsey: Lisa, that is a shocking and horrible experience that you have had. Obviously we will look later at the content of what you think we might do. You said “so many times”—was that different in the most recent election that you stood in?

Lisa Robillard Webb: It has been going on for two and a half years. I cannot seem to get a response. He has been suspended but I do not get regular support. The last time it escalated again, so whenever I stand for election that makes it worse.

Jane Ramsey: What social media is he on?

Lisa Robillard Webb: Twitter.

John Vincent: I have been a parliamentary candidate several times now. My first candidacy was back in 1992, but I have been a campaigner since 1985. I have seen quite a marked change. I am in relatively subdued Surrey, so I do not see some of the intimidation that you might see elsewhere. The referendum had a tremendous impact, and what we were talking about that concerned me greatly was the impact that the mindless abuse has on young people. I have been doing this for a long time now, and you expect a degree of abuse—not to shun it and think it is normal, but to be able to stand your ground. During the referendum, I was on a street stall in Uxbridge. We had some students from Brunel University helping us. Some Leave campaigners targeted the young people in particular with intimidation, and I found myself having to stand between people. That requires you to have a very delicate assessment of the potential for violence in a given situation, and you have to make a judgment as to whether the person is all mouth and no trousers, is just making a lot of noise and will go away if you stand your ground, or whether they are going to start to become physically violent in some way. It takes time in campaigning to acquire that sense of being able to assess someone immediately in a situation like that. As for social media, I have not experienced the extremes that Lisa has experienced. As a councillor, the stuff I used to get was generally letters written in green ink

containing very superficial abuse—just ordinary day-to-day abuse, consisting of crude words. If you write a press release, rarely do they read beyond the headline; they will take your views from the headline, which has made me much more careful when I write headlines about what I put in them. If you blog, people do not read beyond a certain point. They assume you are part of a group and therefore attack that group. It is the indiscriminate nature of that which is sometimes quite disturbing, whereas in the past, at the time of my first candidacy, as a Liberal Democrat you were practically ignored a lot of the time. The abuse you got was that you were irrelevant. Now the abuse you get is much more targeted on an assumption of what you stand for, and that, particularly on the debate on immigration, can be very nasty indeed.

Danny Stone: I run an organisation called the Antisemitism Policy Trust. We provide the secretariat for the All-Party Parliamentary Group Against Antisemitism, which in 2013 ran an inquiry and published a report into electoral abuse, looking not just at anti-Semitism but at other forms of discrimination. In the report you find various horrendous incidences of abuse against candidates: Parmjit Dhanda talked about a pig's head being left on his doorstep, while Oona King talked about sweeping her offices for bugs because of the level of intimidation and fear that she and her staff had. There was a range of experiences and those were at the extreme end, but we also heard about leafleting and abuse in the street, and Lee Scott talked about having a panic button in his house.

What has changed, when we went back to review the report in the past year or so, more of the abuse, as others have said, is online and is more easily discoverable and imitated. I think in social media they call it “dog-piling”, where people jump on top of a message and encourage their followers to join in with abuse. So that has been a change. Something that has remained is that it seems that the parties still have not got to grips with how to train some candidates in what they might encounter, how to report it and how they might be supported through this. We are also looking to candidates to set an example in some instances where they have been perpetrators of abuse.

Jane Ramsey: Do you have information about what responses people have had when they have made complaints to online platforms? Have they all been like the response Lisa had?

Danny Stone: We have had some engagement with the online platforms over a long time, not just around elections. Initially, an individual MP, say, would receive hundreds of abusive messages and would be told to flag every one individually or have their staff do it, which was a nonsense because that would take all day. The platforms have got slightly better at that but their approach appears to be, “We want to stop this stuff before you can see it”, as opposed to necessarily dealing with the problem. They are improving their reporting systems but they are not really good enough. It might be, particularly around elections, although I suppose you would not really want special treatment for parliamentary candidates as opposed to anyone else, that systems could be put in place with the parties where there was an agreement that certain cases would get flagged, or where a party had a whitelisting status with social media companies so that they could more easily report this.

Dr Jennifer vanHeerde-Hudson: I am from UCL and, along with Rosie Campbell and Wolfgang Rüdiger at Strathclyde, have been running surveys of parliamentary candidates as part of our academic research. In the recent general election we surveyed candidates for their experiences, and we are generally terming it

“harassment” but it would include anything from intimidation and abuse online to physical or attempted physical threats. Here are some of the top-line findings that we learnt from the survey that is in the field right now. About 630 candidates came back to us, and about one-third of them had experienced some sort of harassment or intimidation. We found significant variation among the parties, and one of the more interesting findings is that 71% of Conservative candidates have said that they experienced some form of harassment. That compares to 10% of Green, 38% of Labour and 40% of UKIP candidates, so that really stands out as being quite unique for Conservative candidates. We are not yet in a position to say why we think that is. One hypothesis was that some of the Conservative candidates were getting abuse just generally as Tories, but we also wondered whether the lingering inquiry into spending around the 2015 general election was getting some candidates abuse as they were standing, because there was still controversy going on. We see no evidence of that in candidates’ open-ended comments that they were making, so we are not yet clear why this is particular to Conservative candidates.

The other point to raise here is that women are far more likely to experience different types of abuse than male candidates; the figure was 39% of all women candidates compared to 30% of male candidates. We have some information on black and minority ethnic candidates but the sample we have right now is quite small—we have only 27 BME candidates—so trying to tease out meaningful differences about whether women minority ethnic candidates in particular are suffering abuse at a higher rate is difficult at this stage. We hope to be able to report on that when we have more survey respondents, but it echoes the Amnesty International finding that BME women in particular were receiving the lion’s share of abuse.

Jane Ramsey: I have been prompted by Lord Bew that two of our MPs have a vote so I will get them on next, if that is all right.

Kasia Staszewska: At Amnesty International we have been doing research on online violence against women, looking at women who are active in public life, so not only women MPs. As part of our wider work we looked at quite a sample—more than 900,000 tweets to women MPs active on Twitter in the run-up to general elections in the six months from January to June—because we wanted to understand what kind of abuse they experienced, who is likely to be targeted more and what the scale of it is. That is not to say that the abuse is directed only at women in public life, but our approach is that the violence and intimidation that women experience online is often a continuation of the violence and discrimination that they in reality off-line. This abuse is often of a sexist and misogynist nature and includes threats of sexual violence. We published the findings of this research last week so you might have seen it in the papers here and there. Basically the key things that came out were that out of these 177 women active on Twitter, Diane Abbott received the largest amount of abuse—more than 45%, so thousands of tweets. The second was about black and Asian minority women, who were three times more likely to receive abuse than their white female colleagues despite the fact that they are an absolute minority in Westminster. The third was about the general nature of the abuse and the fact that at the end of the day the top five women receiving the greatest amount of abuse cut across all party lines. Despite the fact that Diane Abbott stood out in our research, at the end of the day candidates from all the political parties experienced abuse. We also learned about the psychological impact that this abuse had, and we are really concerned about the fact that it is a serious threat when it comes to encouraging women, especially minority women, to enter politics and other areas of public life. The result can be, and already

is, women silencing themselves because they are afraid to speak up. That is an offshoot of the work we have done but it is quite relevant to the discussion here.

Sir Kevin Barron MP: I chair the Standards Committee over the road, which is being re-formed after the election. I have fought every election as a Labour candidate in Rother Valley, which is one of the Rotherham seats in South Yorkshire. Yorkshire people are pretty straight-talking, as I am, and as a consequence of that there has always been a situation where I have had contact at election time when people have come up and tell me what they think. The essence of new media has changed that quite dramatically, in my personal view. I do not speak on behalf of the committee; as I said, we have not been formed yet. In the 2015 election, someone who I had been dealing with, a constituent of mine who had health problems, was using new media to put out leaflets, which were designed quite brilliantly, saying that I was corrupt, along with one of the national banks that he had fallen out with over previous years. He was threatening to publish the leaflets during the general election campaign. I approached the police but I do not think they had any experience of this, although I am not having a go at them at all. I sat with them and said, "This is what I know about it; I'm not a clinician but this is the situation". This person had a caseworker working with him as well. The police felt that he was in clear breach of the Representation of the People Act and that I should take action against him. I said, "Oh great, so the candidate takes action against someone who has an ill-health problem who has some ideas". In the end of the police took action themselves—I think the charge was harassment, and someone from my office had to go to court—and as a consequence of that it stopped. I am pleased to say that it was managed at that level. During that time, of course, as I am one of the Rotherham MPs, we had the CSE issue, and a major political party standing against us used that on the doorstep. I was called a paedophile and all sorts of things. That ended up in the High Court for defamation and slander. It settled in our favour, as it were, but by and large no one would ever know that because they just keep coming and coming at you all the time. During the 2015 general election I did the hustings, as I had always done. I inherited a seat where we used to do a series of public meetings; my predecessor, Peter Hardy, used to do the same. I had stopped doing those because only one man and his dog would turn up, but we started to do hustings, invited by various organisations, including the church. 2015 was particularly nasty, in part because this particular political party was personally nasty, using the issue of MPs' expenditure as well. I chaired the Select Committee on that so I know a little about it, along with what happened in 2009 and everything else, so that was not a very nice thing to do. We used the new media to enthuse our supporters to come out but someone leaked that to a local website, so when we turned up to do a knockabout in a market on the Friday afternoon, just handing out leaflets and talking to people, the other side turned up too. There was a confrontation on the streets to the level where we nearly had to send for the police, and we had to pull away from doing it. Because the general election this year was a snap election, we did no hustings. In a sense, quite frankly, I was pleased. I am a pretty robust character, but I was pretty pleased about that. Things are changing. It is the easiest thing in the world to send off an email or use Twitter and I get that on a daily basis now, though not at the level that some of my colleagues are reporting in the press. I was reading today about messages being sent to women Members of Parliament saying things like "I hope you get raped". Social media can be a brilliant thing—we are on Facebook this year and we had thousands of contacts, and I survived although I lost out on my majority—and in my view it will be a crucial part of campaigning. The downside is that you are vulnerable because of it. You have to have thick skin but some of it is

not great, I have to say. This is the 21st century and this is what we have to look at regulating, if at all possible.

Jane Ramsey: Thanks for sharing that with us, Kevin. Sadly, that was another horrible story. Simon, you are in an unusual position because you are our newest committee member, appointed by the Prime Minister over the summer. We welcome you to our committee. You spoke in a parliamentary debate about abuse. Do you want to talk about what happened to you?

Simon Hart MP: I am the MP down in west Wales for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire. The reason why I got involved in this is that I have been involved in a number of elections, general and devolved, over the years, and I noticed a significant shift in behaviour between the 2015 and 2017 general elections away from what I think most people would call normal political banter, the sort of stuff that Kevin described and which we would expect and indeed welcome. I thought I would test the water when we got back after the election by having a Back-Bench debate in Westminster Hall. I was astonished by what we discovered—the number of people who were reporting things that went way beyond what could normally be deemed as acceptable campaigning behaviour, but also the number of colleagues who came to me and said, “We’d love to take part and submit evidence but we don’t want to because we don’t to pick the scab and resurrect some of the difficulties we went through during the election. We’re delighted you’re doing this but we’re afraid we’re not going to turn up and make a contribution”. So far the conversation has been largely about MPs and candidates, but the other reason why I did this was the impact of all this on the families of MPs and candidates, our donors, our supporters, our volunteers and businesses that might want to support us. There was a whole lot of collateral activity going on, with one common result: to deter people from taking part in an election. That was the single most important trigger for me; it was people coming up to me saying, “I wouldn’t do your job all the tea in China. I wouldn’t want to get involved. Good for you, you go and do it, but I’m not getting involved”. That cannot be good for the democratic process.

My second point is that everybody touches on social media. This is not exclusively a social media problem, but in some cases social media gives people a sort of permission to behave in a way that they would never behave if social media was not poking them from behind. It was said by the guys from BCS that social media has become probably one of the most campaigning weapons that there is these days, yet that is not the purpose for which it was invented. So we have this incredibly important and vital tool but the people who built it did not build it with democracy and elections in mind, and that raises some quite interesting points about how far behind technology the law and regulation have become. At the very least, I hope this committee and stakeholders around the table will look closely at that. For me, this gives us an opportunity to understand what law already exists. I think there is a lot of existing law that simply is not understood or implemented by the police. We therefore do not really know where we are with the law or what the remedies are. When we have another election, whether in six months or four years, you can be sure that anything we experienced this time will pale into insignificance unless we deal with this now.

Jane Ramsey: That sounds like an important point for us to clock, that the intimidation is of you is as a candidate but the impact is felt more widely among your family and supporters.

Professor Tim Bale: I am from the University of London. I guess I am here because I run a project on party members that involves surveying party members, which we did at the 2015 election and just after the 2017 election. We also surveyed Labour Party members who had joined the Labour Party after 2015, back in 2016.

I want to pick up on the point that was made about the skew in harassment, where far more Conservative candidates complain about harassment than Labour candidates did. That probably reflects reality, and it can be explained in part because the Conservative Party is in government and therefore does things to people rather than simply saying things to or about them, and that will tend to increase opposition and perhaps ill feeling towards it. But we also have to take account of the fact that politics has become more polarised since 2015 when Jeremy Corbyn took over the Labour Party, and there has been an influx of people into the party of people who are rather more used to a kind of factionalised and vituperative culture of politics in which it is perhaps a little bit more normal and acceptable to conduct debate in these very polarised and in some ways violent terms, at least if we are speaking about speech rather than necessarily actions. There are problems in the Labour Party itself, and we have already heard those alluded to. I think that is because some people who have joined the Labour Party come from that culture and believe that the previous members of the Labour Party and some people who represent the Labour Party are sell-outs who need to be purged or at least cleared out. That will involve some argument and debate, but as a tactic it will also involve making people feel very uncomfortable about attending meetings and so on, so in some ways that is a deliberate tactic. Also, for those people—this goes to the comments about anti-Semitism—foreign policy is a very big issue, particularly Israel-Palestine, and that sometimes shades over into anti-Semitism directed at people with whom they disagree.

Although some of these comments have been quite critical of the Labour Party, it bears saying that one of the reasons why people on the left may be rather more active on social media and have a bigger profile there is that our surveys show that Conservative activists are not very active on social media; they are generally much older and less familiar with Facebook, Twitter and so on, so that even if they felt these things they would be more unlikely to voice them through those media. Perhaps if the Conservative Party attracts more young people we may well see an evening up of this, but it is important to realise that to some extent that difference is demographic and structural.

Jane Ramsey: I think we would like to move on in a minute to more specific questions about the challenge of social media, and there might be some disagreements around the room about some of the interesting things Tim has just said. Let us complete this part of the discussion, although this will also segue into the rest.

Fiyaz Mughal: I am from Faith Matters and we run the TellMAMA project, which does a lot of Islamophobic monitoring. There are two or three things that I wanted to mention here. Clearly we agree with Amnesty that we see a lot of BAME women who are clearly targeted, and there is a lot of sexual violence and sexual aggression in the targeting of those candidates. There are other characteristics that are concerning to us: for example, look at the candidacy of Sadiq Khan for London mayor and the kind of extremist rhetoric—I do not overplay my words—that was used against him. Again, that is pretty prevalent nowadays for a lot of candidates who happen to be Muslim. The extremist rhetoric, which comes not just from the far right, says that the threat is Muslim people themselves: “Look, they are coming in

through the parliamentary system by stealth and trying to take over the country in some kind of sharia takeover". That is a very extreme form of rhetoric that is targeted towards candidates and very organised.

My other point is that when candidates are elected—again I use the example of Sadiq— there is mobbing activity, and I refer back to what Danny said about this. Katie Hopkins has a go on a daily basis, saying: "He is a Muslim mayor so he is not the Mayor of London", and people mobbing candidates who happen to be Muslim is very well organised. It is led predominantly by an extremist set of narratives and puts a lot of his candidates off standing in the current political climate, given the Islamist extremist and violence that is taking place and these candidates being caught in the backlash against that. In a way, in the BAME element there are also further elements of fragmentation that are taking place. I wanted to give you some examples of the kind of extremism that you cannot leave out of this debate because it is a part of it, targeting specifically BAME candidates.

Peter Riddell: My locus, although fortunately I do not deal with this currently, is that I was a political journalist for 30 years, I chaired the Hansard Society and I wrote a book called *In Defence of Politicians*, which at the time was described as courageous. In that, one of my points was about politicians. If you look at Gillray's cartoons, some of which are around this room, you can see there was never a golden age. If you look at any description of an election before the Ballot Act 1872, the electorates were very small, entirely male and of a very limited number. Those elections were very tough and often difficult.

I have only one complication to what Tim was saying. Intimidation has appeared more recently in the Militant phase in Liverpool in the 1980s. Jane Kennedy has said very similar things to what is now being said; indeed, about many similar people.

An interesting point that Simon raised was about the use of the word "banter". For the older generation of politicians, there may have been violence underpinning it but there was a sense that it was low-level, for two reasons. First, there was a kind of vigour. Lloyd George had to escape through a window when he was addressing a meeting after his Budget 106 years ago, so there was an element but it was at a more limited level. What has changed is, as Tim said, the increased partisanship on every side. Secondly, technological change is making a difference. As he was describing it, it is impossible to tell the difference between a real and a perceived threat. That is the danger; you feel the threat, even if it is a notional one, and you feel it is aimed at you. That is the really big difference, from my long experience as a political journalist, between that and a bit of rough and tumble or heckling. I have been at meetings with really vigorous heckling where people have been thrown out, mostly occurring with candidates 60 years ago in the post-war era. It is different now because it is much more immediate.

Another big difference, which ties in with the research that has been mentioned, is that there are many more women participating in politics—the perception that women are vulnerable. That is a very important difference. After all, until 30 years ago you would have been talking about fewer women participating in politics. That is a big change. Obviously the same applies to BAME, where there are practically none participating as candidates. The very sharp increase in the number of women candidates and BAME candidates has created a group that the bullies think is vulnerable. That is one of the reasons for some of what has been described because there is a larger group being attacked, which would not have been true in the past.

Jane Ramsey: Before the tea break, we need to move on to the next chunk of this: the challenge of social media and online intimidation. It seems clear that there is a view that the rise of social media has had an effect on the nature and scale of intimidation. Are the norms of political debate on social media different from those in face-to-face communications and, if so, what could be done about it?

Dr Mark Shephard: I am from the University of Strathclyde. While other people have looked at what candidates have said, I looked at what was going on during the independence referendum campaign in 2014 in Scotland—the content of Twitter and the content of moderated forums such as the BBC’s “Have Your Say”. This supports the research that Jennifer, Wolfgang and Rosie have been doing that suggests that women got more negative and more insulting comments than male leaders. We were looking at male leaders versus female leaders. Women got it worst, as did the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, which points to Tim’s point that those two parties were in coalition together at that point. They were the party in power and were getting more of the negative abuse. From that, and this is probably something I can come back to later on, we devised an online guide to which Fs to avoid and Fs to be aware of—it was alliterative for schools. There are five of each; I did a TEDx talk on one, which has been picked up by Education Scotland and is used in classrooms there. I would like to come back to the issue of education. Derived from the research, I came up with a resource that might be useful for England and Wales but also for political parties, which was not something I had really thought about. Listening to this, I think our resource could have a wider reach and usage.

Jane Ramsey: Do you think that in the Scottish referendum there was anything unusual in the abuse that, for example, political journalists like Nick Robinson experienced, which was newsworthy?

Dr Mark Shephard: We tried to pick time periods that we thought would be of interest. So we picked the launch of the White Paper and when there was a year to go till the referendum—times when we thought there were going to be flashpoints. We were not looking at it every single day. Things happened every now and then, so it might be Nick Robinson, JK Rowling or Nicola Sturgeon—there were certain events that flared up. Overall we found that bad behaviour online was quite small—less than 5% was flaming behaviour, less than 5% was swearing. We looked for every swearword under the sun. We were looking for certain things and we might have missed some things in what we were trying to capture, but on the whole it was a minority activity. Things flare up, though. If you ask any journalist, academic, like me, or politician who was involved in this, they will tell you that we saw evidence of this. In the round, though, there was some good stuff out there too; it was not all bad. We probably feel that it was worse than it actually was in the main, but we still need to take action.

Joy Morrissey: Social media was a platform for good and for ill in our most recent campaign. This is a case study of my own personal example, so obviously there is a bias here. I had a lot of BAME activists on my campaign team. What I saw was that on social media there was a lot of backlash over particular issues, when violence or other criminal acts were committed against our office or against other activists—in my example, all BAME, many of them women. We had a lot of Somalian activists, Muslim Asian activists and females who were targeted. Criminal investigations have continued as a result. Social media would be very intense and then you would see action begin to manifest itself during the campaign. You would see a lot of abuse from specific trolls and a lot of whipping up into a frenzy, and then, when the media got involved or there was more coverage of that constituency, that was when there

was an attack on one of our Asian females. Her house was broken into. They wrote, “We know where you live”, “We’re going to kill you”, “You should die” and other very offensive things on her car and on her door, and on the doorstep while she was canvassing she was told that she should have her throat slit for supporting the political party that she did and that she should be in the ground. In retrospect, that particular person maybe should have thought about the fact that we knew who she was because we were canvassing at her doorstep, and that was a case where we were able to prosecute her, but that was not directed at the candidate; it was directed at an Asian female activist whose only crime was wearing a rosette of a colour that did not agree with the popular view at the time.

You have alluded to the popular uprising of social media. Social media is a powerful tool to bring people together in a very powerful way, but it can also bring a runaway mob mentality. In the case of our campaign, and in what I saw on the ground when our office was vandalised and Somali-owned businesses with posters of us in their window had their windows broken, social media were used as a platform to bring people together in a negative way that produced action on the ground. That is where the danger can come in with social media. I would like to see more BAME and women candidates involved in public life, and part of why I am here is to take these issues forward because those candidates were very courageous in putting themselves in this circumstance and receiving that kind of abuse. That is what I wanted to highlight.

Jane Ramsey: That is obviously horrific stuff, Joy. Did Women2Women feel supported by your political party, which is the Conservative Party?

Joy Morrissey: Yes.

Jane Ramsey: Do you think there is sufficient support from political parties for candidates and activists—I ask the same question of Labour candidates like Lisa and of Liberal Democrat candidates and indeed of current MPs—or do you see that there is more that political parties could do to support candidates’ online presence and the way they are treated?

Joy Morrissey: I do not think they had seen the level of abuse that translated from social media. You expect things directed at the candidate and you expect abuse, but I do not think they had foreseen it trickling out to BAME activists. By the end, we could not wear rosettes, we had to have the police with us and we had to always go in groups of two.

Jane Ramsey: Was that in particular geographic areas or wherever?

Joy Morrissey: Wherever. Interestingly, though, only BAME activists were targeted on my campaign team. No other group received the sort of abuse in their homes—death threats to their face, being spat on, being shoved or being intimidated. Those things all happened to the BAME activists, and I do not think anyone realised that that would cross over from abuse on social media and things directed at the candidate into a sort of mob mentality at the activists. I do not think anyone had seen that before, so there was insufficient understanding of the capabilities of social media.

John Vincent: We are in the infancy of what can be done when it comes to social media. The parties are trying to exploit it for campaigning purposes to the greatest possible extent, so maybe occasionally we are fuelling the engine. We just do not know how to control it. You have to remember that there is a multi-billion-pound

corporation behind this so regulation, trying to step into this arena, is very difficult. We need some kind of social etiquette. Whereas if you had the type of discussions that take place in social media groups in a pub, a club or a smoke-filled room somewhere, there might be a self-regulating aspect to that within a given group, but people seem to feel much freer to say the most outlandish things on social media because there is no consequence. That is the problem.

Simon Hart MP: The self-regulatory aspect of it instantly evaporates in the circumstances that you describe, whereas on social media, which is permanent, it is there for ever, it is often anonymous and it can be referred to maybe six months later by a child in the family who might not understand that a death threat made to you in the pub under the influence is gone and forgotten about—it is part of the campaign—but this thing is there for a very long time. The problem with social media platforms that I have spoken to is that they are inclined to fold their arms and say, “Well, if you’ve got a problem, complain”. There is a rather complicated route by which you can complain and which, if you are lucky, might result in some subsequent action somewhere down the line. That is not necessarily an easy process for a vulnerable person, or even just a busy person, to follow.

Abuse is not always about death threats, rape threats and all the rest of it. I use the example of Byron Davies, former MP for Gower, defending a majority of 26 at the election, who was subject to a social media campaign based on the dishonest assertion that he was subject to a criminal investigation. It was not even an exaggeration of a story; it was completely invented. He had to contend with that for four out of five weeks of an election campaign, with precious little help from his political party and absolutely no help from the police, who said it was all too complicated and would have to go to the complicated crime unit in York, which would report back in July. It is the use of social media to completely invent a set of circumstances that they know will damage that candidate’s chances of election. In a sense, that is abuse every bit as bad as some of the other stuff that we have heard about.

Jane Ramsey: Kevin, do you have any thoughts on party political support to candidates around the use of social media?

Sir Kevin Barron MP: Let me say this. I am of the older generation in politics. The doorstep is not like it used to be 20 or 30 years ago, we all accept that. Social media can be weaponised against individuals on a daily basis. This is on a daily basis with media, celebrities and everything else. It is also a bloody great asset. I was talking on a daily basis—not me personally but my campaign; I have to have mediators on social media whom I tell what I want to say and they interpret it to keep me out of the newspapers with headlines like “‘Hashtag: I’ve Been Quoted Out of Context’: MP”—to thousands of people in the Rother Valley about things that were coming hot from the television. I think back to when I was a candidate in 1983. You put one leaflet out, you took it round the houses and that was it. Yes, there was television, but in my view social media is the most powerful tool that candidates can have. However, it has a massive downside as well. It can be used against you, as in the case of what was deemed to be harassment against me in 2015. We have to find a balance. You can go to the doorstep, but as a candidate I have the ability to talk to thousands of people on a matter that is relevant that day, as opposed to guesstimating what might happen during the campaign. It is a massively powerful tool for people who want to be elected. It has a downside, obviously. In the 2015 campaign I had three hustings, and I instructed members of the Labour Party not to go. If they had turned up, I would have had the police as well. This was my own family. I had an agent. My

wife sat there. I said, “You sit in the back and you don’t say anything”. It was nasty. It was not general discourse; it was just nasty stuff. The defence when we got to the High Court was that it was all right because she kept her job. If that is where politics is going, it is going to be tough. Look at new media in two ways. You can go knocking on doorsteps, but it is a massive benefit for people to talk to the electorate. That is the way I look at it.

Dr Victoria Nash: I am from the Oxford Internet Institute. I have three points on various aspects of what we have just heard. The first is that there are so many debates that we have organised at the OII where the finger of blame has been pointed at social media as causing some problem or modern social ill. In this context as in others, we need to be very careful about attributing to social media what are largely problems that originate in broader culture. We have already had discussion about the febrile political environment that we have operated in over the last couple of years, with the polarisation of parties. We should properly also mention the level of debate in mainstream newspapers around the last couple of elections as well as what we have already discussed. So that is the first point—social media being made very much the focus. Perhaps it exacerbates some problems but it very rarely causes them.

Secondly, we also run the risk of putting all social media in the same basket. It is probably useful to remember that different social media have different tools that make them more or less easy to use for negative and intimidatory purposes. Again, thinking about where parties can help, it is worth thinking about whether you feel safer on Facebook because you can have more of a moderator roll. Are you happy being on Twitter, where there is more scope for anonymous comments? How easy is it to block users, and so on? Now, with us moving onto Snapchat and other platforms, this game will continue. We need to focus on what particular platforms allow and what they enable in terms of different types of speech and intimidation.

Lastly, there is something I would counsel against. I cannot imagine what it must feel like if you are subject to these levels of intimidation and abuse, and I can see how distressing it must be to have to complain in order for anything to be done, but I am so wary of allowing any systems that use simple artificial intelligence or keyword searches to block communications on these platforms. How do you know that that is not legitimate political speech? That is what puts you, as parliamentarians or candidates, in a difficult situation; you have to find a system that on one hand will enable you to reach out to thousands of individuals to hear what they have to say but on the other hand filters out the worst forms of intimidation and abuse.

Dr Ruth Lewis: I am from Northumbria University. I have done some research, not about parliamentary candidates but about women who debate feminist issues online. Before the most recent general election we did a survey with colleagues about their experiences of abuse, and I want to pick up a few comments that have been made. First, they had much more extreme experiences of abuse on Twitter. For many of them, it was only when they started using Twitter that they began to experience abuse. It is important that we should not see all forms of social media as lending themselves to the same sort of experiences. Secondly, the focus just on words, as if words themselves will reveal an abusive context, is really problematic. Lots of the women who took part in the survey and interviews gave examples of abuse when very few offensive words were used. There were very subtle threats because of the context of the previous communication. For example, a woman talked about a man who was in abusive communication with her, and who was known to be a rapist, making comments about the train station he was going to get off at and mentioning

the road that she lived on. None of that would come up in a check just for words. We need a more victimological approach, understanding the experience of abuse from those who experience abuse rather than being able to read it off the words themselves.

On that, we now know an awful lot about experiences of abuse. We know that women and BAME are targeted in particular. What we probably know less about is the perpetrators. We can make all kinds of assumptions about who they are—are they 15 year-old boys in their bedrooms?—but we need to understand more of the patterns of perpetration of abuse to see how much they are part of organised groups, whether they are far-right groups, men's rights activists or whatever. We need to have a stronger grasp of who it is that is perpetrating this kind of abuse.

The thing we probably all fear is that this abuse silences people. It is talked about a lot in terms of women candidates and BAME candidates and people in public life, not just those connected to Parliament. No doubt it does have silencing impacts, but it is also important to remember that certainly from our research—which was of women engaged in feminist debate, so it is a select group—experiencing abuse also had quite a galvanising effect on them. At times it would be silencing, they would withdraw and be more cautious about who they engaged with, how they engaged, the language that they used and so on, but a stronger, more enduring sense for them was that it was galvanising; the abuse confirmed there needs to be involved in public life and not be silenced and excluded from public life, which was the intention that they perceived. So we need to be careful that we do not assume either blanket motivations or blanket outcomes. The evidence certainly seems to suggest that it can be both silencing and galvanising.

Jane Ramsey: That is very helpful because I do not think anyone, including those who have given evidence thus far, has spoken about the perpetrators. It was all interesting, but that point was particularly interesting.

Sheila Drew Smith: I hesitate to interrupt before the tea break and keep people away from their tea. It has been really good to hear the evidence that people have brought to the table. One thing that has struck me is that if any of you have evidence of where you have complained to the platforms, it would be really helpful to hear about the response has been—not for discussion now, but if you submit that to us. We have found it has been difficult to get a handle on what has happened and what the processes are that the platforms themselves engage in.

Jane Ramsey: Mark, would you mind summarising this chunk?

Professor Mark Philp: There is a range of issues and I cannot cover them all. There seem to be a series of questions about the robustness of the evidence that an inquiry like this needs in order to make recommendations and so on. There is a general sense that people are saying there is an increasing level of intimidation to MPs and candidates, and that part of that increasing intimidation is an extension to activists as well as to MPs' families. It is not clear to me, even if we have evidence on the first, that we have evidence on the second, and I am pretty sure we do not have any evidence on the third other than anecdotal elegance. That is the kind of thing that we should be trying to collect. It is also worth going back to the period of the Labour Government over the Iraq war and asking how far MPs then had a sense that they were under this level of intimidation, as a useful comparison.

On the other evidence questions, as Lisa has said, people believe this stuff. I would like to know how much evidence there is that people do believe it. What people say

and what they believe are often widely apart, and I am curious as to how far this research can help us to explore that issue.

The third question is: who are these people? Who is making the comment? What research is there on who these people might be? What do we know about them? How do we collect evidence about them? Is this entirely a sphere of anonymity that means we will never be able to find out anything more about them? Are they young, middle-aged or old? Simple things might help to clarify some of those issues.

Somebody said that there is a very well organised mobbing. Actually, well organised mobbing is at two ends of a conceptual spectrum. A mob is not, for the most part, well-organised. The question is how far this is intelligently organised, how far the organisation of it is a function of the media form rather than of any presiding intelligence, and how far this is just very chaotic. Evidence on that would be very helpful.

The one thing we have not discussed at all is the definition of intimidation, which the committee is trying to work on. It would be useful to come back and have a few words about that.

Committee on Standards in Public Life

Roundtable discussion: Review into intimidation of Parliamentary candidates

Tuesday 12 September 2017 at 3 pm

Committee members present:

Lord Bew, Rt Hon Dame Margaret Beckett DBE MP, Sheila Drew Smith OBE, Simon Hart MP, Dr Jane Martin CBE, Jane Ramsey, Monisha Shah

Roundtable members present:

Professor Tim Bale	Queen Mary, University of London
Sir Kevin Barron MP	House of Commons
Sir Paul Beresford MP	House of Commons
Professor Rosie Campbell	Birkbeck, University of London
Professor Neil Chakraborti	University of Leicester
James Davies	BCS
David Evans	BCS
Adam Finkel-Gates	
Claire Foster-Gilbert	Westminster Abbey Institute
Dr Jennifer vanHeerde-Hudson	University College London
Dr Ruth Lewis	University of Northumbria
Alasdair MacDonald	EHRC
Joy Morrissey	Women2Win
Fiyaz Mughal	TellMAMA
Dr Victoria Nash	Oxford Internet Institute
Rt Hon Peter Riddell CBE	Commissioner for Public Appointments
Lisa Robillard Webb	
Dr Jonathan Rose	De Montford University
Sam Smethers	Fawcett Society
Josh Smith	Demos
Dr Mark Shephard	University of Strathclyde
Kasia Staszewska	Amnesty International
Danny Stone	Anti-Semitism Policy Trust

Jane Ramsey: This session is on the slightly different theme of the relationship between the public and those in public life, which obviously includes parliamentary candidates and MPs, though not exclusively, and changing the tone of political debate. One of the themes that we have heard loud and clear is that there has been, shall we say, a degeneration in discourse, and it may be that some of those who are more experienced feel that it is a bit more of the same but via a different medium—that is, social media—that allows even more of it and on a greater scale, while others think that in any event it is all very uncivil. I do not think anyone around this table, particularly parliamentarians, expects this life to be a university debating society, but death threats, rape threats and so on happening to your family are clearly unacceptable. However, we have had some submissions from the public saying that politicians themselves use a hostile or uncivil tone, and therefore encourage a climate where intimidation becomes acceptable. We would be very interested in whether you think the tone of political debate has changed in recent years. Who would like to start?

Dr Jonathan Rose: I am from De Montfort University. My interest is really in the public's interaction with MPs and how they feel about politics, the nature of politics and standards. I was interested in the idea about the relationship between the public and those in public life, because honestly I do not think it has changed a lot. If you look at indices of things like trust in politicians—Ipsos MORI has a very good index that goes back 30 or so years—there has not really been a lot of change. What it looks like now is very much what it looked like in 1983. There was a big change in the middle on expenses, but it came back from there. Stuff is all much of a muchness with what it was before. What has seemingly changed is the tone of debate. There is a good reason for that—or, rather, it is a bad reason but it is explicable: more and more political debate seems to happen online and we know that there is an online disinhibition effect. It is well accepted that people do and say things online that they would never do in person. So those interactions in and of themselves have changed the nature of the debate. Of course MPs used to get hate mail but that is a very labour-intensive thing to do: you have to print something out or write it by hand, put it in an envelope, take it to a post office and maybe even pay for a stamp, so someone who sends hate mail really hates you and that is a real threat. Someone who sends you a message on Twitter, which takes 10 seconds to do, has probably forgotten all about it before you have seen it. They are probably the kind of people who send these messages day in, day out. This is probably how they interact with their friends online and they probably do not regard it as a particularly threatening thing to say. In some cases, obviously not—we have heard some pretty terrible examples of that—but for the most part, yes, the tone has changed online but I strongly suspect that the overall tone is not that much different.

Professor Tim Bale: I want to say two things that are slightly contradictory. First, as Peter said, we have to be careful that we do not look back at the past and see some golden age. Some of you are old enough to remember, or at least are young enough to have read about, Aneurin Bevan saying that Tories were lower than vermin. That was pretty vituperative, and I think if a politician said that these days they would be severely criticised. On the other hand, I think it is the case that, either as a sin of commission or omission, politicians to some extent set the tone, and it is not always just to do with using particular forms of language. Even something like the Labour MP who recently said she could not possibly imagine having a friend who was a Conservative—that begins to legitimise the idea that these people are two tribes, not that they are conducting a debate between fellow human beings who have differences. So what comes from the top to some extent widens the legitimate space for the bad behaviour that we have talked about.

John Vincent: On the positive front, I would like to say that with all the doorstepping I have done—which I have to admit has been in southern England—the general level of civility, when the door opens and you talk to someone, has not really changed that much. Most people are okay. It is that 5% or so where you have a situation that might be a bit aggressive and unpleasant. I would also like to say that, as you alluded to, the candidates themselves are not entirely innocent in these matters. I went to one Churches Together public meeting with a candidate for a party that was expected to win in a given seat—I will not say who it was—and he was extremely rude to one of the political groups in the audience, unnecessarily, given that he usually wins in that particular seat. So sometimes candidates run away, jump on a bandwagon and make a bad situation worse. As candidates we have a responsibility to try to avoid doing that sort of thing, and the party needs to educate us not to jump on those bandwagons. I am afraid there is no point fighting tribalism; it is inevitable. There is a tribal element, and I do not perceive that it is much greater now, except in the case of the referendum. We are divided in the sense of Leavers and Remainers, and some of the things that are being said across those boundaries are repulsive, to say the least.

Alasdair MacDonald: I am from the Equalities and Human Rights Commission. Being a statutory body, we look at this issue from the legislative point of view. We have also done a lot of work on political participation and how that affects the dynamic between the electorate and the elected. It has come out pretty clearly that there is a gulf there and that there is perception that the tone of modern political discourse permeates through society and normalises abusive and occasionally aggressive language when discussing politics. We did a report recently called *Pathway to Politics*, and our elected colleagues around the table will know that being elected is the final step in a long journey of civic and community participation. We are seeing a lot of people with what we call protected characteristics—BAME, disabled, women or a combination of all those things—are discouraged at the early stages of civic or community participation, so are never even close to becoming an elected official. Part of the reason for that is the perceived adversarial “Yah boo” culture in parliamentary politics, so right the way down the chain we are seeing a lack of diversity in the types of people who feel they can become an elected official. That exacerbates the gulf between the electorates and the people who have been elected to represent them. We feel that that helps to stoke this kind of division and some of the abuse and intimidation that we have been talking about today.

As a statutory body, we are noting the complexity of the legislative context that we are talking about here in terms of what the response might be. Freedom of expression is protected under the Human Rights Act 1998. That includes the right to offend and shock, and that right is extended even further in political campaigning, so where that crosses the line into abuse and intimidation is very nebulous, to say the least. The Crown Prosecution Service has introduced some helpful guidelines to begin to draw that distinction. I think it was mentioned earlier that the currency of the legislation is also an issue. The two Acts that govern communications in this area are from 1988 and 2003 respectively, so they entirely predate the social media age. That is more on the response side, but there is lots to do in terms of modernising the legislation as well as on that chain of political participation for specific engagement, right through to Parliament.

Jane Ramsey: We might want to return to the question of modernising the legislation as we look to potential remedies or proposed actions, so please hold that thought. I am sorry, I cannot see your name.

Sam Smethers: I am not Peter Riddell.

Jane Ramsey: I did not think you were.

Sam Smethers: I am Sam Smethers, Chief Executive of the Fawcett Society. I am sorry that I have only joined you now having been elsewhere, so I have missed the first half of the discussion. If I repeat anything that you have already covered, I apologise. I wanted to pick up a couple of things. We sent you some written evidence, which I hope you have received. I want to flag up the experience that we have had through our work on local government. Local councillors have reported very similar abuse when they were campaigning. Women in particular were more likely than men to say that they identified a fear of violence or harassment and abuse in the electorate as a factor for them in barriers to engagement. They were also saying that it made them think twice about standing or made them think they wanted to stand down. I definitely agree with the point that intersectional identities, black women in particular, were reporting a heightened experience of targeted abuse.

It is important to understand the nature of this. It is not just about the “Yah boo” nature of politics; this goes above and beyond that. People have to endure threatening, obscene and extremely offensive stuff on a regular basis. It is important to understand the trajectory we are on. I used to work for two MPs, one of whom was Bernie Grant. He used to get a lot of written hate mail through the post on a regular basis. Imagine that multiplied hundreds or thousands of times over coming through your phone. How do you deal with that in terms of your communication with other people, on a scale that we find it hard to comprehend? This affects not just our parliamentary candidates but our local government candidates, and it affects women who speak out in public debate in an ordinary day-to-day way, whether they are standing for public office or not. So whatever this committee considers as remedies for parliamentarians also need to be something for others in other walks of life. Obviously Twitter is a great leveller and we are all engaging with each other, so we cannot draw a ring around it.

We think the platforms themselves have very unsustainable solutions to the problem. You cannot have the volume that we are dealing with and just leave it to the individual to make a complaint. We recently tested out Twitter’s responses to complaints and it was found wanting; it did not take down the content we reported. We gave it seven days to do so but it took no action whatsoever; the accounts were not blocked and the content was not removed. That makes us feel very doubtful about the systems and processes that it has in place to deal with the problem. Anything that needs an individual to report, and is a system that is just about responding to that individual, is bound to be left wanting. We need a very different mechanism.

Jane Ramsey: We are picking up exactly the point you make about local councillors, as I said in the earlier session, from others in public life such as police and crime commissioners or people who are standing for those offices. So we will have plenty of evidence and we are also going to be talking to the Local Government Association. Have you given in evidence the response from Twitter?

Sam Smethers: Yes.

Jane Ramsey: Because it is important that we hear as much as we can about whether or not—and if so, how—the social media platforms have responded to complaints, including from MPs who have stood and parliamentary candidates.

Professor Mark Philp: I want to make a brief point about referring back to how things used to be. It may be the case that things are worse than they used to be but it may also be the case that how things were not the way in which you have to have a modern parliamentary democracy in a multicultural society that encourages the participation of all its members, that the party system in the 1920s and 1930s is not a good model for that and that the form of parliamentary debate is not necessarily a good model for that either. Rather than thinking that there is this baseline, we have gone beyond it and that is bad, we might also need to think about what baseline we need in order to have a society that is multicultural, egalitarian and inclusive.

Danny Stone: On this point about a baseline and red lines, I think it is important to re-establish and re-emphasise some of the red lines. In terms of candidates, the all-party inquiry into electoral conduct found that a number of years back the Conservative Party chairman had written to all candidates about their language and behaviour and what have you, and I think in the 2015 election there was something similar and that Iain McNicol has done so previously for the Labour party. We should ensure that there are frameworks for writing in such terms to candidates. The Electoral Commission has a code of conduct. If a candidate breaches that code, are they put through the disciplinary procedures of their own party? Could there be a mechanism that takes the political heat out of something whereby if a candidate has behaved in some way that could be addressed by the party after the election when it is not going to cause an electoral advantage for their opponents if they address it during the election? In terms of the public, where judges are sentencing those who have perpetrated abuse online, are they using appropriate criminal behaviour orders, and are the CPS or other bodies appropriately publicising those cases where action has been taken? Should it become like drink-driving, where it is embarrassing not to have your licence if you go too far in terms of your behaviour when driving? Might it be that we can set a level where it is just not the done thing to abuse others online — not only will you get into trouble but it could be embarrassing that you will have your social media accounts taken away from you if you behave in a certain way online and break the law?

Jane Ramsey: Interesting points there. Have you submitted as annexes to your evidence the previous report and conduct? Thank you; I have not seen it all as yet.

Dr Ruth Lewis: I want to make a quick comment in response to what Sam was saying, which was really useful, about how we are talking about something that goes beyond “Yah boo” politics. One of the things the women talked about our study was the extent to which their experience seemed to be about deliberately derailing debate. So it was not just heightened, impassioned disagreement; it actually stopped the debate happening. Where social media can be a fantastic resource for discussion, debate and education, as Kevin was saying, where there is a relatively organised abusive engagement, the motivation might be to stop social media being used in that way. We need to understand that difference. It is not just a case of going a bit too far; it is trying to exclude some people from civic engagement.

Jane Ramsey: What steps can and should political parties be taking to prevent their members from engaging in the intimidation of parliamentary candidates? I wondered if you would like to comment on that, Margaret, as one of the political members of our committee.

Dame Margaret Beckett MP: We try very hard—at local government level as well; this is throughout the party structure—to discourage people from behaving in a way that is unacceptable. We try to suspend them at once if it appears they have

breached those standards, and then there is an investigation and so on. I do not want to be invidious and identify people but, for example, during the run-up to the recent election when we all had to select a whole raft of candidates at very short notice, there was someone who was not allowed to stand as a parliamentary candidate because of allegations and evidence of behaviour that was thought to be unacceptable. That was in circumstances that were quite difficult for the party but nevertheless the decision was taken that risk have to be run because this was not acceptable behaviour. I echo some of the things that some of the people have said around the table: we try very hard to encourage women and BME candidates to come forward and to support them when they do and to support them if they do. We are increasingly seeing a fall-off in the number of women who are prepared to come forward as candidates, and it seems to be an effect of what they think they might face. Jonathan said, quite correctly, that an awful lot of this stuff has always been there, and I share entirely his view that the ease of sending an email or going on Twitter or whatever allows people to say what is on their mind now whereas, if they write it down and look at it, that might be a different matter. I always used to think that one of David Blunkett's problems was that he did not see how something looked on the page, so he might send you a note that was really rather curt which, if he had seen that difference, he might not have sent.

By the way, I ought to have started with a confession: I am not on social media. I feel rather guilty about that because I feel it is a luxury that my younger colleagues will never be able to enjoy, but I was fortunate enough to become involved in politics when this was not necessary, or indeed possible, in order to become established and known, so I can get away with it. However, I have my own tiny experience, despite not being on any platform, of discovering that there was a Facebook page using my name, photograph and address, which was absolutely nothing to do with me. We tried to get Facebook to take it down and it would not. To be fair to the company, it said there was no mechanism even for complaining about it unless I joined Facebook, and then I could use my profile to put the argument.

Jane Ramsey: That is an interesting point.

Dame Margaret Beckett MP: I declined to do so. The House authorities got involved but got pretty much the same response. I think in the end the page disappeared for a while. I have no idea whether or not it is back and I do not really care. The big difference for me is that if say something that I know a lot of people will probably object to, I do not know whether they are all screaming at me and saying horrible things because I just do not look. We do not even get much in the way of hate emails, so I am shielded from it.

If I may make one general observation, I think there has been a gradual deterioration in the behaviour of all of us who are engaged in public life. I think back to when I was first in the House. To me, you are lying if you say something that you know to be untrue when you are saying it. We all know there are occasions about the devaluation of the pound or something, when maybe a Minister has to take such a step, but in my time I have watched people lie at the Dispatch Box and known it, and I have been shocked by it. The difficulty that that raises is that if it goes on and affects public policy and so on, in the end, whereas it would have been utterly outrageous to call someone a liar when I was first in the House, sometimes the only thing you can say is, "Actually, that is a lie. It is not true and I know that this person knows it". The situation has deteriorated. If you say something that turns out to be untrue then you are accused of being a liar. I remember that happening to Robin Cook early on when he was Leader of the House. There was some Whitehall row

and Robin was asked about it on the Floor of the House. He gave the answer that the people involved had given him, saying, "These are the facts, Secretary of State". It turned out not to be true and he was called a liar.

The whole tone has deteriorated. I know that will not be easy to get back but we have to try because what has started off as a deterioration in language could get worse. Someone, I cannot remember who, mentioned the recent referendum. Maybe referendums make things worse. To my mind, the first time when I really observed this becoming so much worse was during the Scottish referendum. Scots colleagues have all kinds of stories about the responses to what they were saying. In one case, I recall one of our senior colleagues literally being surrounded by a mob, screaming, shouting and generally being extremely physically intimidating, and their political opponent said, "Oh, that's community justice". We have seen a real deterioration that I think is extremely dangerous, and which has begun to stray into physical intimidation.

Jane Ramsey: That is a theme that has arisen and become clear today about the Scottish referendum, the EU referendum and then the 2017 general election, with a bit of 2015 thrown in.

Dame Margaret Beckett MP: I come back to what Danny said: we have to make it no longer acceptable. There were all sorts of stories just after the EU referendum in the tabloids, such as the one about the French woman who had lived here for years and suddenly her next-door neighbour said to her, "Well, you'll be going home then". To me that is absolutely shocking. We have to make it unacceptable for people to do that.

Professor Tim Bale: In terms of what parties can do, suspending or expelling people will have an effect on some members but of course for some people that will not make much difference to what they do; they will carry on with their online campaigns and so on whether or not they are a member of the party. It can have an effect but it will not solve everything.

Simon Hart MP: On the point that Tim has touched on, it will have some effect, but at the moment the parties' position is not having any effect. Although we have seen by way of evidence some codes of practice and guidelines to candidates' agents as far as social media use is concerned, what this has stopped short of is any indication of sanctions will be if you do not comply with those recommendations. From listening carefully to what Alasdair said just now, I fear that if you are thinking of a life in the public eye, there is an argument that I might attempt to make late in the evening that if you do not care about this kind of stuff then you are probably the wrong person to be a candidate. If you really want to extract our political talent from the widest possible gene pool, then we are not going about it in a very good way at the moment. There will always be a long queue of people who want to be MPs. It does not matter what the career prospects may be; there will always be a group of really enthusiastic people who think this is the life for them. However, what that tends to filter out are people who would really bring something interesting to politics rather than just an ambition to be a success—people who might not otherwise even have thought about it until they were 40, 50 or 60. Those are the people that I suspect we are missing from politics who could enrich Parliament. I believe this is having a deterrent effect on them so the gene pool from which we are fishing is getting smaller and the people who are ending up in Parliament see nothing wrong with what is going on and indeed, as someone said, contribute to the problem by behaving in a loutish and disrespectful way once they are in the political system. If

we want to be really old-fashioned and stuffy about this, maybe it is not only a political problem but a wider social problem. I have talked to teachers at home who say that this is not a problem unique to politics; it is a problem when someone can post an anonymous accusation about a teacher, maybe of a pretty graphic and unpleasant nature, which will be read by the teacher's family. That will put them and others off from ever going into the teaching profession. So this problem is not unique to us; it is about manners and respect. Maybe we should have the Education Secretary in, because this is something that we need to be looking at outside politics as well.

David Evans: I am from BCS. We are a charity with a Royal Charter. Our mission is to make IT, computing, digital or whatever you want to call it good for society—we have a lot of work to do—and we are a professional membership organisation. We aim to bring people together to solve problems that are going on. We worked in partnership with Demos on some research that we took to the party conferences last year, and we talked to activists. There is an interesting point about the data; there just clearly is not enough of it, and we are not even sure what hypothesis we are testing. From our own experience, though, if you are testing a hypothesis, that generally is a perception of reality, and if people perceive that there is a problem then there is a problem.

I echo what people have said about the differential impact on women and BME communities. It is interesting to me personally—this is a theme across all our work to do with technology—just how powerless people feel who are actually quite powerful. In talking to political parties, civil servants, MPs and people in technology companies, we have found a single theme: everyone feels that they cannot solve it. If you look at the human beings who work for organisations such as social media companies, none of them particularly likes it any more than anyone else does. We seem to have slightly lost our ability to build common-ground coalitions to solve these problems, and that is what we are keen to encourage people to try to do. The conversations we have had suggests that it is not a problem that the Labour Party, the Conservative Party or indeed any party can address, but there is potentially scope for them to address it together. At the risk of sounding highfalutin, imagine when people established norms for hustings or for the very basis of government. We are just going through the same thing. Professor Philp's point that this is not about going back to something but about going forward is very powerful, but we want to go forward to something that we want to live in. If we assemble all the forces that we have at our disposal and submit ourselves to that common agenda then it is entirely possible, and that is what this committee is here for.

The encouraging thing is that there is very little disagreement about the boundary of the problem at its harshest. One of the aspects of the report with Demos was the categorisation of abuse, and you could run an entire life's research on such a thing. If you look at the basis of the nastiest stuff and the effect that it has, as far as I can tell there is universal agreement across the political parties and elsewhere that this is a problem.

Jane Ramsey: You are right about that general agreement. I do not know whether we have heard many questions about what we might do about it and I would like to have a little time at the end—

David Evans: If I can add to that point, cross-party activity has to be there. We have to create the equivalent of the physical social norming whereby if one of your party members at a hustings starts being stupid then everyone rolls their eyes. We have

to have that same effect. It would be more powerful, when a Labour candidate was being attacked, if the Conservative candidate stood up for them than if their own party activists did, or if there were some later procedural thing. The regulatory impact and policing the actions taken by the platforms have to be part of the mix, but actually we need a human response first. We almost need some kind of response service where we actually stand up for each other online to get away from the situation where if someone is attacking you, you feel a thousand miles eyes looking at you and you feel alone, and if you are the one doing the attacking you feel righteous and vindicated and that you are attacking that person for the right reasons.

Jane Ramsey: Lisa, would have that have helped you?

Lisa Robillard Webb: I come from a very grass-roots background. I live in a normal street. I go for parish and town. I do not know if that is encompassed in here but I stand as a candidate at all levels. For me, it is just a question of practical support. My experience in the Labour Party is very different from Margaret's. I do not have my telephone calls returned and dozens of my emails are ignored. It was only when Ben Bradshaw, a male MP, took up the case that anything happened after two years. So there are support systems in my party, but for people lower down the scale accessing them is really difficult. My advice for all parties is that if you feel you are being intimidated or abused online, there is some duty of care to you from the party. If I were employed I would get that, so there is an element of duty of care to me. There could have been simple things, such as a set format in which they could take my complaint and some advice because I do not use Twitter. As a victim, when I am most vulnerable, I have to build the case. I am a self-employed mum and I have to take two days off work to build the case, feel terrible and submit it. He gets shut down but sets up another account the next day. I go through the process again, he gets shut down but sets up again. So it is about accessing the support services and a duty of care to all activists and candidates.

Jane Ramsey: That is very helpful.

Sir Kevin Barron MP: This is not necessarily in defence of MPs, but I have spent since 2005 on the Standards Committee; I am its chair now but I was the lay member during the expenses scandal. We try really hard to get a better understanding and a better code of conduct. I think there is an issue about expectations. This is not making excuses for MPs, but we did a bit of outreach earlier this year in relation to the new code of conduct that, as we mentioned earlier, Parliament will be bringing in in the next few months. I was down in Wales and I said, "So MPs should tell the truth all the time, then, should they?" They said, "Yes, yes". I said, "Like you do in your family? You never keep things from one another?" they said, "Oh, that's a point." I said, "It is a point. What can you expect from Members of Parliament?" If you look at what has been said when people were asked, "What are MPs like?", right from the 1940s when they started measuring how MPs were thought of, we have ranked under estate agents and lawyers; we have almost been swimming along the bottom of the pond, and by and large that has been tolerated. I do not what is going to come up in the next few months, but whatever comes up, we will have to try to manage it. We are no different from society. It is a representative democracy, and sometimes we get people in who are very challenging for the system, just as a lot of our neighbours are—as some people find in my case, but then they are very challenging as well. We are no different from anyone else in that sense, although, as I say, this is not to make excuses. Still, we are not as bad as other countries. I keep looking at what has happened in the United States, and we are very close to the US. This room is not yet part of the swamp. If it

does become part of the swamp, and this is the wider responsibility of people in here, it will be the media—how it is reported and everything else—that will take us down the road where people can say, to answer the questions that were asked earlier, “Oh, it’s not a lie, it’s just fake news. Anyway, I’ve got some more facts here. These are the real facts rather than the facts that you’re quoting me now”. I hope we do not get there. There are wider responsibilities in that, not just for elected politicians.

On what has been said about political parties, it is very difficult. I come from Rotherham. A report was published last week about what people did or did not do, or what they did or did not know. There were senior elected councillors on Rotherham Borough Council who refused to give evidence into the inquiries that took place, where if they had been questioned by the police it would have happened. Two leaders of the council refused to give evidence and I think that is wholly and utterly wrong but, unless they broke the law, the law cannot force them to do it. If you have bad candidates or someone who is elected who says something untoward, their actions may be dealt with by the Standards Committee from time to time but it is difficult to see what you can do.

I am going to finish on this because we have a volunteer in front of us, in an area not unlike mine, to be a parliamentary candidate in Rother Valley who has been quite successful for me since 1983. Most political parties are groups of people who volunteer to come together now and again. We have to accept that these are not institutions where we can have employment or anything else; they are groups with limitations who from time to time want to make the world a better place, I suppose. We have to expect that the people we are looking at and the people around them have certain limitations to what they can do.

Professor Neil Chakraborti: I will keep this really brief. I am professor of criminology at the University of Leicester and director at the Centre for Behavioural Studies. Much of my work is with diverse sections of society, with the victims of hate, hostility and intimidating behaviour. I also work with offenders, in prisons and with police. You capture a wide set of views and experiences through the nature of that kind of work. I want to make three very brief points. First, to endorse something that Simon said earlier when he drew parallels with what is going on in wider society, we have heard today about a real rise in harassment and intimidation directed towards parliamentary candidates. That is symptomatic of what is going on within wider society: we are seeing staggering levels of racist, misogynistic, disablist, homophobic and religiously motivated abuse on social media and offline, so it is really important to see all this within a wider context.

The second point, following on from that, is around the referendum. We have had a few references to the referendum and the tone of political debate. The research evidence that we have gathered has shown that there was a change. The scaremongering and demonisation around those debates had real implications in terms of legitimising hostility towards particular groups, we know that, but there is another set of implications that are not really discussed that much and are very relevant today. We know that diverse sections of the public felt a diminished sense of trust in politicians as a result of those debates. Many of the thousands of people we have worked with in the last couple of years have talked in really derogatory terms about politicians. They have spoken of a lack of trust and respect and an increasing sense of detachment, and as a result, as we have discussed already, there is no way that those members of diverse sections of our society will engage in politics, either as parliamentary candidates or in the voting process. We have

certainly seen a clear link between that referendum and opinions about politicians that are linked to abuse towards politicians. So there are real problems there that we do not have time to discuss in much depth.

Thirdly, we have hardly spoken about the challenges today. There are immense challenges in reporting, recording, regulating, policing and prosecuting online hostility; they are vast and we cannot do justice to them in the next minute. We have spoken about wanting to change the tone of debate and making things morally unacceptable; that is all well and good but it is pretty hard to do. There is scope to improve all those areas, and that needs to sit as a priority as part of these discussions alongside any measures that are taken regarding parliamentary candidates or by parliamentary parties. We really need to scrutinise the reporting, recording, regulating, policing and prosecuting.

Jane Ramsey: Apologies to one or two people who I know wanted to come in, but it is important to finish on time. Please put any further evidence of points that you feel you are able to make into the office. I should clarify something as the word “standards” has been mentioned a lot. We are the Committee for Standards and Public Life, an independent committee, albeit one appointed by the Prime Minister, while Kevin is chair of the Committee for Standards for MPs, which is rather different. So there is a lot of upkeep of standards around. I shall ask Mark to encapsulate the themes that have arisen and further areas that we should be looking at, which will of course include potential remedies.

Professor Mark Philp: So, no pressure. First, I would say it is pretty clear that the form that politics takes can exacerbate this problem, and that is something we need to address. I was struck by what David Evans said: “We need to move forward to something we want to live in”. There has not actually been a lot of thinking about what exactly we want to live in with regard to the political sphere. I think there has been a tendency to say, “We know what it used to look like and at least we can get back there”. I do not think you can get back there. The big question is: what is the new future going to look like?

The second point is that political parties clearly do not seem to be providing the support for candidates of the kind that they need, and do not seem to be providing advice and guidance for the protection of families. From what people have said, it is not clear that they are providing the support that is necessary for activists who are involved in that. All those things seem to be important, and looks as if there has to be cross-party agreement on this because, if there is not, any attempt by a single party to enforce a set of regulations will be undercut by other parties that do not enforce them.

At the same time, this is clearly a very divisive political moment. The last few years have seen a level of electoral and referendum activity that has polarised politics in the country to a degree that we have not quite grasped, and there is a question about how you move forward on that front as well and how far it is related to the broader issue of standards within the political arena.

Lots of people have said something about public education and about educating children. There is a real problem here. I have a bunch of undergraduates working on young people’s attitudes towards politics, and they clearly are interested but for the most part do not know anything about it, or at least about the way that it operates at the moment. A better education civics might actually lay the basis for something in future.

Lastly, to reiterate what Jane said, if there is evidence, please write to us and report it to us—do not post it on Twitter.

Lord Bew: I want to thank you all very much for coming. We started slightly late and I had the impression in the last minutes that there were people who wanted to get in. Please contact us; we are very keen to hear the views of everyone around the table. This has been an eloquent discussion. I heard many points being made, and I could see them echoing into our report and playing into the things we might say in our final conclusions. We need the help of the people around this table, with the experience and knowledge that you have. I ask those who maybe wanted to say more today to please contact the committee. Thank you all for giving up your time this afternoon; we are really grateful for your attendance.