

Lord Evans of Weardale KCB DL
Chair,
Committee on Standards in Public Life.

Rt Hon Jacqui Smith
Chair,
The Jo Cox Foundation.

20th November 2019

Dear Jonathan and Jacqui,

Tackling intimidation in public life

Thank you for your letter to the Prime Minister dated 29 September, sent to him in his capacity as Leader of the Conservative Party. I am replying as Co-Chairman of the Conservative Party. This letter also follows my meeting with the Foundation in October.

In our meeting, I outlined the Party's broad agreement with the Committee's view that open political debate is an essential part of a healthy democracy, particularly throughout election campaigns. Sadly, we are all too aware of the increased levels of abuse and intimidating behaviour politicians and candidates from all parties are facing, whether online or on the doorstep. We have a shared duty to confront this behaviour and commit ourselves to removing it from public life.

Following the 2017 general election, the (then) Prime Minister commissioned the Committee to undertake a review into intimidation against election candidates. The Government responded to the Committee's report in March 2018.¹ Ministers recently published a comprehensive statement outlining the work and steps taken since that response.²

The Government response from March 2018 did not agree with the recommendation of a joint code:

"The Government recommends that all political parties put in place their own code of conduct for all their representatives. The Government does not propose to initiate further steps for a joint code – this may create delays towards action by individual parties, given there are over 300 registered political parties. However, the Government does believe that, as a matter of self-regulation, each registered political party should draw up and publish a clear statement of the standards expected of its members, affiliated groups and activists, and how the party would uphold such standards in this code. Different parties may develop differently worded codes: what is important is the effective enforcement of the fundamental principles behind them."

In addition, we have concerns that, however well-intended, joint codes may fuel and encourage the issuing of politically vexatious and unfounded complaints. One of the reasons why the Coalition Government abolished the Standards Board of England was that its collective code

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-response-to-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life-review-of-intimidation-in-public-life>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/update-on-tackling-intimidation-in-public-life>

perversely resulted in tit-for-tat, partisan and malicious complaints against councillors. In turn, such a standards process undermined the reputation of local government, rather than strengthening it.

In the Committee's report on *Local Government Ethical Standards* of January 2019, the Committee accepted this point. It recommended that councillors' code of conduct should prohibit "trivial or malicious allegations by councillors." However, there would be no such barrier from third parties making such allegations, nor indeed making allegations about allegations. The Committee should be conscious of the risk of such a joint code becoming a political football in itself, especially during election periods.

British democracy has always been robust and oppositional. But it is important to distinguish between strong political debate on one hand, and unacceptable acts of abuse, hatred, intimidation and violence on the other. Such abusive behaviour is primarily from online and anonymous activity against candidates, not by candidates.

In that light, we agree with the Government's position that political parties are best placed to draw up and oversee their tailored code of conduct. I can confirm that the Conservative Party has in place a robust Code of Conduct that all candidates, members and elected representatives are expected to behave in accord with.³ Our Code also sets out our process for investigating complaints, and we take swift action against those who are found to have broken the standards expected of them. The 'Nolan' principles from the Committee on Standards in Public Life are embedded in the Code.

Earlier this year, my predecessor, Brandon Lewis wrote to senior figures across the party to remind them of our responsibility to ensure every activist, member and elected representative conducts themselves in accordance with the expected standards of behaviour under our Code of Conduct.

As a party, we have a long and proud history of delivering opportunity for all and will always take a zero tolerance approach to any form of discrimination, abuse or intimidating behaviour whenever and wherever we see it. The Conservative Party has also committed a further review into our processes on tackling prejudice and discrimination (including addressing issues relating to tackling Islamophobia). I hope this will further strengthen our zero tolerance approach and improve best practice across the Party.

Tackling online harms will be a priority for the next Government. I can confirm that the Conservative Party's manifesto will commit a Conservative Government to taking further steps – to ensure that no-one is put off from engaging in politics or standing in an election by threats, harassment or abuse, whether in person or online.

Brexit has been a uniquely divisive issue in British politics in recent years. It is my firm belief that resolving this as quickly as possible, and respecting the referendum result, will be the necessary first step towards bringing the country back together.

Yours sincerely,



THE RT.HON. JAMES CLEVERLY
Co-Chairman of the Conservative Party

³ <https://www.conservatives.com/codeofconduct>