

Committee on Standards in Public Life
Room G07
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London
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chair@public-standards.gov.uk

John Swinney MSP
First Minister
Scottish Government
Leader of the SNP

Sent by email



**Committee on
Standards in
Public Life**

21 May 2024

Dear John Swinney,

Setting the tone of debate

I am writing as Chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life to ensure that standards in public life will be kept front of mind as the general election draws closer.

It has been the case for some years now that politicians from all parties regularly experience abuse and intimidation. This Committee's work has shown the severe risks and consequences of intimidation of those in public life: discouraging people from taking part in the political process; eroding trust in our democratic institutions; and threatening individuals' and their families' physical safety.

Navigating this environment is a formidable problem, much of it beyond your control or influence. But, we must all do that we can to help stop such intimidation. We are therefore asking you to set clear expectations about the standards of conduct that you expect of your campaign team, election agents and candidates as they campaign ahead of the general election. Setting the right tone will help foster civil debate in campaigning and reduce the sort of personal abuse and intimidation of candidates for public office that we have seen in recent years.

We do not underestimate the intense nature of election periods and recognise that robust debate is a vital and important part of the democratic process to enable scrutiny and proper exchange on policy viewpoints. It is, however, vitally important that disagreement should be expressed in a civil manner and that inflammatory language and actions should not be tolerated. Actions and words on the part of political parties and candidates influence wider public discourse and political culture as well as having implications for long term trust in our institutions.

We would therefore encourage you to promote among your candidates your own codes of conduct. You might also refer to the [statement on conduct of political party members](#) which we developed with The Jo Cox Foundation and which has been in place since 2020. This statement sets out, at a high level, the minimum standards of behaviour that should be expected of candidates; it does not replace party codes, but complements them by acting as a high level statement of principle. The statement is set within the context of the Nolan Principles of Public Life - selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership. These Principles are a personal responsibility for all those in public life and have long been the basis for ensuring high standards in the public sector. These Principles set the standards that the public will expect candidates to uphold if elected.

Political parties play a central role in our democracy and have important responsibilities towards their candidates and members, and more widely to the general public whom they wish to serve. In the forthcoming election, as the leader of your party, you will have a major influence on the quality and civility of public debate - both in person and online - through the conduct of your candidates, campaign teams and election agents. We urge you to ensure that they recognise their responsibility to promote civility and the core values of our political system.

I am also writing to the Leaders of: the Conservative Party; the Labour Party; the Liberal Democrat Party; the Democratic Unionist Party; Plaid Cymru; the Alba Party; the Social Democratic & Labour Party; the Green Party; the Alliance Party; Reform UK; the Workers Party of Britain.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Doug Chalmers', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Doug Chalmers CB DSO OBE
Chair, Committee on Standards in Public Life