

Proposal for:

A Speaker's Conference on protecting our democracy by guaranteeing the ability of Members of Parliament to go about their work without threat, harassment, violence or intimidation.

A Speaker's Conference:

Established by the Speaker with terms of reference laid down in a motion of the House.

Undertaken by a committee of Members from across the House chaired by the Speaker.

To gather and consider data.

Empowered to call evidence in writing and orally.

A date by which to report with recommendations.

**Rt Hon Harriet Harman QC MP
Member of Parliament for Camberwell and Peckham
Mother of the House of Commons
26th September 2019**



Twitter: @HarrietHarman
www.harrietharman.org.uk

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Introduction

The fundamental principle of democracy is that MPs are elected by the voters and once elected no-one must stop them carrying out their duties. They must be able to get on with their job. This is recognised in the ancient concept of “contempt of parliament” which is the offence of obstructing parliament in the carrying out of its functions, or of hindering any MP in the performance of their duties. Yet, now, on a more or less daily basis, MPs are threatened with physical violence. Where MPs are threatened just because they are an MP that is a contempt of parliament and an undermining of our democracy and demands action.

The advent of social media means that the whereabouts of MPs, whether at home or at work, are very widely known. Social media is important for MPs to communicate directly with their constituents and account for what they are doing on a regular basis. But it is also used by people who anonymously threaten MPs and by those who whip up hostility and violence towards MPs.

Now, more MPs are women, living away from their families on their own during the weeks when parliament is sitting. MPs are high profile and, when there’s an atmosphere of hostility to politics and politicians they are vulnerable.

BBC 5 Live has conducted a survey of women MPs asking about our security. It showed:

- More than half of women MPs questioned had faced physical threats.
- An overwhelming majority of women MPs have received online and verbal abuse from the public.
- Two thirds felt "less safe" following the murder of the Labour MP Jo Cox.

This is a problem for men MPs as well as women. While MPs are away from their home during the week their families, living at an address which is well-known locally and easily found on the internet, can feel vulnerable. This applies to elderly relatives who might be living with them as well as spouses and children. A police officer stood by while a member of the public shouted out at the young children of Jacob Rees-Mogg. If their parent had been a member of the public rather than an MP it’s surely the case that the officer would have stepped in and asked the ranting member of the public to “move along now”.

Women MPs, particularly younger women and most particularly ethnic minority MPs are subjected to the greatest number of threats. A study by Amnesty International in 2017 found Diane Abbott received almost half of all abusive tweets ahead of the June 2017 General Election and black women politicians are almost twice as likely as their white peers to be abused on Twitter.

There has always been a level of threat against MPs. We don’t know the scale of the problem because MPs are reluctant to report and many threats and offences go unreported.

When I was first an MP, for a period of many years, I was subjected to threats to kill by a man the police describe as a fixated individual. He waited outside my family house where I lived with my 3 young children. He came to my advice surgeries and threatened me and my staff. He engaged in obsessive writing of letters to newspapers, people in government and others in the public domain making lurid accusations against me. And he threatened to kill me. For years I did nothing about it. I only went to the police when advised by the Maudsley, to whom he expressed his intention to kill me, and because they thought him likely to try and carry out the threat. I hadn't reported the threats before for a number of reasons. I feared making him even angrier and increasing the danger. I was one of only a very few women MPs and I didn't want to give the impression that women were too scared to be MPs. I didn't want my constituents to think I was weak and fearful when my job was to stand up for them. I didn't want to be accused of absorbing precious police time while police resources were spread thinly for my constituents. And I hoped that if I ignored the threats they would go away. They didn't, of course, till the police stepped in.

We also don't know the full extent to which MPs are altering the way they work and travel because of these threats. Their priority is to get on with their job, not to talk about their own personal safety.

Parliament has taken many steps to protect MPs both before and in particular after the murder of Jo Cox as she held her constituency advice surgery. MPs can apply for funding from IPSA for extra security in their own homes and constituency offices.

MPs who are threatened all deal with it differently. Some ignore it hoping it will go away. Some call the police - and depending on which police area they are in get widely differing responses. Some take out injunctions against the threatening individual - hoping that so doing will inflame them less than a police intervention or worried for the threatener's mental health if the police are involved.

When an MP is threatened by a member of the public the response of the police and the CPS varies in different areas. On some occasions the Criminal Justice Agencies react on the basis that it is their job to protect the MP. Sometimes their response is based on the sense that they regard it as their job to protect the rights of the public, to demonstrate, to have free speech in relation to their MP, to challenge their public representative.

The first time the police were called to one of my advice surgeries when a constituent was threatening my staff, the officers concerned said they could not intervene as my surgery was a public event which members of the public had a right to attend. This was a misunderstanding of the legal position which is that where an MP books a venue for a surgery, constituents are there at the invitation of the MP and if the MP asks them to leave they have no right to be there. But this further illustrates the point that there is no clear guidance to police about the extent and limits of the right to demonstrate against, and to approach and challenge your MP. Similarly, there is no guidance to prosecutors about where the public interest lies when they are making a decision about whether to bring a prosecution against someone in respect of an alleged crime against an MP.

Over the past years the concern has mounted but there's been no comprehensive consideration of the issues at stake and the measures needed to address them.

Unless we respond to threats and abuse we are colluding with the notion that we deserve to be denigrated and abused. We cannot just denounce every ugly incident but take no action.

There is also an issue of whether by our own words in the House of Commons our political debate fans the flames of threats and intimidation that leads to violence. The rules on language in the House of Commons date back centuries well before the era when MPs conducted surgeries in small community halls and tenants' centres and before women were a major part of the Commons.

It is therefore time to review the rules about language within the House to consider whether they need to be amended so that they are appropriate for today's context.

The responsibility for ensuring that MPs are able to get on with their work, vote without looking over their shoulder and freely engage with their constituents and the wider public lies not with them as individuals or their party or the Government. It lies with Parliament. Parliament must step forward to address them.

Background to Speaker's Conferences

Extract from House of Commons Library briefing



Speaker's Conferences

Standard Note: SN/PC/04426
Last updated: 1 December 2009
Author: Isobel White and Andrew Parker
Section: Parliament and Constitution Centre

The Prime Minister announced on 3 September 2007 that he had proposed that the Speaker should call a conference to 'consider against the backdrop of a decline in turnout, a number of other important issues such as registration, weekend voting, the representation of women and ethnic minorities in the House of Commons, and that he should also examine in parallel with the Youth Citizenship Commission whether we should lower the voting age to 16.' On 22 July 2008 the Speaker announced the terms of reference for the new Speaker's Conference and the proposal for it to be set up as a Committee of the House. On 12 November 2008 the House of Commons agreed to appoint a committee, to be known as the Speaker's Conference. The Conference has published two interim reports during 2009.

4 Procedure and membership

There are no fixed or statutory rules governing the creation of a Speaker's Conference. However previous Conferences have been established by the Prime Minister issuing an invitation to the Speaker to preside over an all-party conference. The terms of reference are usually specified in the invitation, but not the membership or procedure. The Speaker informs the House of his acceptance and explains the terms of reference. There is no need for a formal approval or otherwise by the House, although in 1944 there was a two day debate on a motion for the House to welcome the proposal to set up the Conference. It was agreed without a division.²⁷ The first Conference in 1916 was comprised of 5 Peers and 27 MPs and the 1944 Conference was comprised of 3 Peers and 29 MPs. Thereafter Peers were not included and the 1965-68 Conference was comprised of 29 MPs; the 1973-74 Conference of 29 MPs and the 1977-78 Conference of 29 MPs. For further details of the membership of the Conferences see Appendix I of this Note.

The reports of the Conferences have usually been in the form of letters from the Speaker to the Prime Minister, published as Command Papers. See the tables above for further details.

Erskine May, pp64

SPEAKERS' CONFERENCES ON ELECTORAL LAW

The Speaker has also presided over the Conferences on Electoral Law following an invitation from the Prime Minister to do so. Such Conferences have examined various matters of electoral law. The Speaker has formally appointed the members of the Conference on receipt of party nominations. Conferences have been served by a joint secretariat from the House of Commons and the Civil Service.⁷⁶ They did not enjoy the powers and privileges of select committees. They sat in private and did not publish their proceedings.⁷⁷ The Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation was established in November 2008 by resolution of the House (see p 854). See also pp 31-32 on the Electoral Commission.

Democracy and Human Rights: The legal background

Our democracy depends on everyone having the freedom of expression, the freedom of speech, the right to protest and the freedom of assembly and there being a free press. Those rights are enshrined by virtue of our being party to the European Convention on Human Rights and the Human Rights Act 1998.

Political speech is a very important type of expression - both the freedom of expression of the individual or group expressing their political opinion and the freedom of the MP to express their views.

As Members of Parliament we all recognise this and that it is our positive duty to uphold those rights. It is essential that the public can not just elect MPs but also challenge them once they are elected.

Moreover it is recognised in case law that the law applies differently to MPs for example in respect of defamation and privacy. This is based on the recognition that in some respects

we are different from private citizens. We have put ourselves in the public domain. We are elected into public office. We are publicly accountable.

As champions of our constituents and exercising our responsibility to hold the powerful executive to account, we need to be robust and resilient.

But we also, crucially need the freedom to get on with our work unhindered and as individuals we have the protection of the criminal and civil law.

There is, though, no national guidance from the police or from the CPS about how police and prosecutors should balance the rights of protesters and demonstrators on the one hand and on the other hand the rights of MPs to get on with their work.

Without such guidance there is unjustified variation of approach between different parts of the country and police officers have to make their own, difficult judgments about where to draw the line between competing rights of demonstrators and MPs.

The need to keep a record of all the serious threats to and crimes committed against MPs

The incidence of serious threats and criminal acts against MPs is not clear because of under-reporting and because there is no-one responsible for gathering this information and for recording it centrally.

On 28th September 2018 I asked the House of Commons Library for information on the number of crimes committed against MPs and specifically crimes that have led to a conviction.

They replied this “information is not available” and “information on the outcome of any investigation of these crimes (conviction etc) is not available”.

Neither of the two crime series (Crime Survey for England and Wales, Police Recorded Crime statistics and their equivalents in Scotland and Northern Ireland) record the occupation of the victim at a level where the number of crimes against MPs can be identified.

The only information the library has is from a Freedom of Information response published by the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) with regard to the number of crimes against MPs that were reported to the MPS’ Parliamentary Liaison and Investigation Team (PLAIT) between August 2016 and 10 July 2017.

The response suggests that during this period there were 102 crimes against MPs reported to PLAIT broken down as follows:

Malicious Communications	71
Theft	15
Criminal Damage	07
Harassment	05
Racially aggravated Harassment	04

(Please note that these statistics do not cover a full year). The Library were unable to verify that all crimes against MPs will have been reported to PLAIT or that some crimes may have been reported to other police forces (for example in the constituency).



Freedom of Information Request Reference No:

I note you seek access to the following information:

a) The number of crimes against MPs reported to the Met's parliamentary liaison and investigation team since the date of its creation to 10 July 2017 or whatever data has been most recently recorded.

Please can this information be broken down by month and also provide details of the nature of the crime (eg physical or verbal assault) and how it was dealt with (eg the perpetrator was charged/ cautioned).

Can you also say whether the incident took place through social media or if it was an offline offence.

DECISION

I have today decided to disclose data in relation to crimes against MPs reported to PLAIT and the nature of the crime.

With regards to your query relating to how a crime was dealt with, please note that although a crime might have been reported to PLAIT, the nature of the offence might have occurred outside of the Metropolitan Police District and as such would be referred to another Police Force to investigate. Where this is the case information relating to the outcomes etc will regrettably not be held by the MPS.

However, where a crime is investigated by the MPS and outcome data is held this is exempt from disclosure. Similarly, to advise whether the incident took place through social media or offline is also exempt. Therefore, this response serves as a Refusal Notice under Section 17 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (the Act).

REASONS FOR DECISION

This information has been exempted, as to provide a breakdown by the month crimes were reported, how it was dealt with and whether the incident took place through social media or if it was an offline offence, could undermine any ongoing investigations and lead those who may have perpetrated a crime to have knowledge of whether their crime had been reported and if it was still being investigated, thus allowing them to either have the confidence to undertake more criminal activity or evade capture. Therefore, Sections 30(1)(a) and Section 31(1)(a)(b) are engaged.

Furthermore the Metropolitan Police Service can neither confirm nor deny whether any further information is held in relation crimes against MPs that might or might not

have been reported to PLAIT, as the duty in s1(1)(a) of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 does not apply, by virtue of the following exemptions:

Section 30(3) - Criminal Investigations
Section 40(5) - Personal Information

Section 30 - Investigations and Proceedings Conducted by Public Authorities

The strongest reasons favouring disclosure is providing transparency to policing operations and assurance that the police service is appropriately and effectively engaging with the threat posed by various groups or individuals.

However, the strongest reason against disclosure of the requested information is there a public interest in safeguarding the integrity of police investigations and operations.

The Police Service is charged with enforcing the law preventing and detecting crime and protecting the communities we serve. As much as there is public interest in knowing that policing activity is appropriate and balanced this will only be overridden in exceptional circumstances. The areas of police interest is a sensitive issue that reveals local intelligence, therefore after weighing up the competing interests I have determined that to provide a breakdown giving the month the crime was recorded and state the outcome of the investigation may compromise any investigation taking place. Disclosure under the Act is a disclosure to the world not just to the individual making the request. The release of this specific information, may disclose the level of policing interest in a particular area and may give those who may have were involved, either through being the perpetrator or who offered any assistance in this criminal act an insight into the nature and scope of the investigation.

After weighing up the competing interests I have determined that disclosure of information pertinent to any investigation would undermine these enquiries and the role and the effectiveness of the ongoing investigation. Therefore, the balance test favours non-disclosure.

Section 31 - Law enforcement

The most persuasive reasons for confirming or denying any further information is held would be greater assurance to the public that any reported crimes to the police are investigated thoroughly and would give an indication of the level of crime that is being reported in this area.

However, this need to be weighed against the strongest negative reason, which, in this case, is to confirm or deny any further information is held would compromise and undermine the MPS's law enforcement capabilities in its ability to prevent and detect crime. The effectiveness of any ongoing investigations may be compromised as potential offenders would be alerted and able to identify the focus of police activity. They could then take steps to disrupt this investigation and evade prosecution, which could ultimately lead to the need for more police resources.

Therefore, it is our opinion, after weighing up the competing interests, I believe that the balance test favours neither confirmation or denial.

Section 40 - Personal Information

Section 40 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 is designed to address information that is covered by the Data Protection Act 1998.

Under section 40(5), the MPS is not required to comply with the requirements of section 1(1)(a) i.e. the duty to inform the applicant whether or not the information is held.

Section 40(5)(a) exempts a public authority from the duty to confirm or deny in circumstances where the information requested, if held, would constitute the personal data of the applicant.

Therefore, to either confirm or deny the existence of any further information regarding a criminal investigation that may identify any individual would, in this instance be disclosing sensitive personal data. For example, such a statement in relation to your request could be used along with any other information already in the public domain, to confirm to the world at large whether an individual was subject to a police investigation either as a suspect or as a victim. This will constitute a breach of the Data Protection Act. Alternatively, such a statement may impair the ability of the MPS to protect personal data in relation to similar requests for information.

To the extent that the information requested would, if held, contain personal data, the MPS is not required to confirm or deny whether the information is held subject to the provisions of section 40(5)(a) of the Act.

Please note that the rationale presented above is in relation to the duty to confirm whether the information requested is held by the MPS.

DISCLOSURE

In relation to the first part of your query, 102 crimes against MPs have been reported to Parliamentary Liaison and Investigation Team (PLAIT) since its creation last year (August 2016) to 10/07/2017.

Although, I am unable to provide a monthly breakdown of the crimes, I am able to provide an overall breakdown which is as follows:

Malicious Communications	71
Theft	15
Criminal Damage	07
Harassment	05
Racially aggravated Harassment	04

TABLE 1. Some of the recent violence, threats and abuse against MPs

In date order – most recent at the top.

MP	Party	Abuse	Action	Date
Anna Soubry MP Broxtowe	Conservative	Threatened and harassed outside Parliament by a group of protestors shouting 'Anna Soubry is a Nazi'.	60 MPs write to Met Police chief to ask for more police protection outside parliament. Nick Boles Point of Order in Chamber. Harriet Harman calling for a Speaker's Conference.	7 th January 2019
Dawn Butler MP Brent	Labour	Dawn Butler tweets that she was threatened on London tube.		6 th December 2018
Jacob Rees-Mogg MP North East Somerset	Conservative	Jacob Rees-Mogg and children harassed outside his London home. "Your daddy is a horrible person". Police officer standing by.	Harriet Harman raised in Business Questions, 13 th September 2018	12 th September 2018
Rosie Cooper MP West Lancashire	Labour	An alleged member of a banned neo Nazi group planned to murder Rosie Cooper in an act of what he termed "white jihad".	Jack Renshaw, 23, pleaded guilty at the Old Bailey to preparing an act of terrorism by buying a machete to kill West Lancashire MP Rosie Cooper. Renshaw had been arrested in January 2017 on suspicion of stirring up racial hatred over two anti-Semitic speeches he had given.	12 th June 2018
Antoinette Sandbach MP Eddisbury	Conservative	In June 2018 Antoinette Sandbach reported an email she was copied into to the police. In December 2017 she tweeted that she had received threats.		June 2018

Dominic Grieve MP Beaconsfield	Conservative	Has received a number of death threats and reported these to the police.		December 2017
Diane Abbott MP Hackney North and Stoke Newington	Labour	Diane Abbott received almost half of all the abusive tweets sent to female MPs in the run-up to the General Election*. Including being called a n***** and 'black bitch'. She said she had received " rape threats, death threats, and horrible images on Twitter ". The death threats include an EDL-affiliated account with the tag "burn Diane Abbott". *Research by Amnesty International– Sept 2017.		
Nusrat Ghani MP Wealdon	Conservative	Nusrat Ghani told BBC Radio 4's Today: "I am a Conservative, I am a woman, I am Asian and I am Muslim and that makes some people very angry. And the fact that I had the audacity to stand for public office causes some people offence."		July 2017
Sheryll Murray South East Cornwall	Conservative	Someone urinated on her office door, swastikas were carved into her campaign posters, she received abuse on social media saying things such as "burn the witch" and people plastered Labour party posters over her home.	She spoke about this in PMQs in June 2017.	General Election 2017
Sarah Woollaston MP Totnes	Conservative	Told <i>The Guardian</i> she felt she was being "forced out of town" by abusive words painted on her constituency office building.		General Election 2017
Harriet Harman MP	Labour	In May 2016 police were called to one of my advice surgeries when a		2016 and 2017

Camberwell and Peckham		<p>constituent was threatening my staff.</p> <p>In 2017 my office referred 4 pieces of correspondence to the Parliamentary Liaison and Investigation Team (PLAIT).</p>		
Luciana Berger MP Liverpool Wavertree	Labour	<p>Twitter troll Joshua Bonehill-Paine aged 24- ran an anti-Semitic hate campaign against her – he wrote five blogs calling her a “dominatrix” and “an evil money-grabber” with a “deep-rooted hatred of men”. In one, he claimed the number of Jewish Labour MPs was a “problem”.</p>	Jailed for 2 years.	December 2016
Anna Soubry MP Broxstowe	Conservative	<p>A man tweeted that someone should “Jo Cox” Anna Soubry.</p>	<p>The Twitter user was identified and convicted for sending offensive messages. Michael McAlpine, 25, from Bethnal Green was given a suspended prison sentence.</p>	December 2016
Angela Eagle MP Wallasey	Labour	<p>A brick was thrown threw her constituency office window and she faced death threats.</p>	<p>Angela Eagle was told to stop holding open constituency meetings.</p>	July 2016
Tulip Siddiq MP Hampstead and Kilburn	Labour	<p>‘If I could kill you I would’ - one of the many online threats she has received.</p>	<p>“I don’t know anyone who has not had to deal with it,” she said, it is “frightening and upsetting” and a group of women MPs have an unofficial support group to deal with it.</p>	June 2016
Jo Cox MP Batley and Spen	Labour	<p>Murdered in her constituency on 16th June 2016 by far-right nationalist. It has emerged that Jo had been harassed in many messages over a period of three months before she was murdered.</p>	<p>Thomas Mair was Jailed for life in November 2016</p>	16 June 2016

Jess Phillips MP Birmingham Yardley	Labour	Has received threats and abusive messages. She said she received more than 600 threats of rape in one night on Twitter.	Jess said she was considering leaving Twitter because of the amount of abuse directed at her: "It's not a solution just to block and ignore them in my case. The only solution in stopping me seeing it is if I stop going on Twitter, which is a very real possibility."	2016
Paula Sherriff MP Dewsbury	Labour	Was sent a Facebook message from a man who said: "Dead girl walking. Hope you get raped. We got your phone number and details."	The man later received a suspended sentence.	2016
Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh MP Ochil and South Perthshire	SNP	"In the past 14 months I have been called a Nazi, received messages which have called for me to be shot as a traitor ... and strangers have attacked my father. Some of the dreadful things I have had said to me are not worthy of the status and statute of this chamber. My husband sees these messages, my children have to read this garbage and my staff are required to read it."	Said she often felt too worried to talk publicly about the amount of abuse she received, mostly sexist. "We already [face] a deficit of women, of people with disabilities, of members of the LGBTI community in public life... How are we going to get them to come forward unless we tackle this?"	June 2016
Liz McInnes MP Heywood and Middleton	Labour	During the referendum debate, one user tweeted her: "We will see what you say when an immigrant rapes you or one of your kids".	Twitter said this did not violate its rules. Liz condemned "the apparent lack of coherent policy" among social media companies to combat online trolls and hate speech.	May/June 2016
Stella Creasy MP Walthamstow	Labour	Trolled on twitter by Peter Nunn retweeting rape threats.	Jailed for 18 weeks.	2014
Stephen Timms MP	Labour	Radicalised student Roshonara Choudhry attempted to stab Stephen	Jailed in November 2010.	Incident happened

East Ham		Timms to death in his constituency for supporting the Iraq war in 2010.		in May 2010
Nigel Jones MP Cheltenham	Liberal Democrat	Mr Jones's assistant, local councillor Andrew Pennington, died in the attack at the MP's weekly constituency surgery after being stabbed six times. Ashman had previously admitted the manslaughter of Mr Pennington on the grounds of diminished responsibility.	Robert Ashman, 52, was convicted of attempted murder for trying to kill his local MP Nigel Jones with a Samurai sword. Mr Pennington was posthumously awarded the George Medal for bravery for saving Nigel Jones's life.	28 January 2000

Raising the issue in the House

21st May 2019

Intimidation in Public Life, Westminster Hall Debate by Simon Hart MP

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab)

I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this issue forward for debate, and I acknowledge his consistent work on it over the years. I think we all agree fully with what he says, the propositions he puts forward and the context in which he places them. This is not just criminality against individuals; even more importantly than that, it is a fundamental attack on our democracy.

How does the hon. Gentleman think we should address this issue? Obviously, there are actions the Government need to take, and we know they are concerned, but in a way the issue is wider than that. It is an issue for all the parties and for the House as a whole, not just for the Government. What does he think about the mechanisms for taking action? One of the things I have considered—I do not know whether he thinks this is a good idea or whether he has an alternative proposal—is that we should have a Speaker's conference on this issue. That would need the Government's support. It would bring together the CPS, the police, the political parties—

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair)

Order. Interventions should be brief.

Ms Harman

Sorry, Sir Gary. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that might be a way to go beyond discussion and take action?

9th January 2019

I am calling for a Speaker's Conference on the question of MPs' security, right to protest, freedom of speech, contempt of parliament, safety for constituency offices, MPs' families and Twitter threats. This call is supported by Ken Clarke MP, Father of the House.

Tweet:



The image shows a screenshot of a tweet from Harriet Harman (@HarrietHarman) posted 13 hours ago. The tweet text reads: "This is not free speech or the right to protest - is attack on democracy. We need a 'Speakers Conference' to ensure MPs who voters elected can get on with their job! @Mr_speaker_uk @NickBoles @Anna_Soubry". Below the tweet is a video embed from BBC Politics (@BBCPolitics) with the title "I do object to being called a Nazi". The video description says: "Protesters confront Conservative MP Anna Soubry on the street after interrupting her live BBC interview by...". The video has a duration of 1:28. At the bottom of the tweet, there are icons for replies (12), retweets (28), likes (134), and a share icon.

This is a problem for women MPs in all parliaments – not just in the UK

3rd December 2018:

Extract from the foreword to the Women MPs of the World report

Women MPs from 100 countries across 5 continents gathered in the historic chamber of the House of Commons on Thursday 8th November.

There are now women in nearly every parliament in the world. We have fought our way in past prejudice and discrimination, often in the face of threats and violence.

Women in parliament are pioneers. We have been elected to sit alongside men in our legislatures. But we are, as yet, not on equal terms. We are still in a minority in legislatures which are male-dominated. We are all relatively new arrivals in institutions which have

been traditionally male.

The conference sessions in the Chamber of the House of Commons and in the Committee Rooms considered a wide range of issues. But though we came from very different countries, our goals are the same. We want to play an equal part in the political life of our countries and we want equality for women in our countries.

- Virtually all women MPs face opposition to their participation in public life. That ranges from abuse online, threats in person and threats to their families.
- There was a strong strand of work by women MPs on women's safety - at home, at work and on the streets. Many countries are bringing in tough new laws against street harassment.
- it is necessary to challenge men in parliament who abuse women parliamentarians.

8th November 2018:

Extract from my opening speech at the Women MPs of the World Conference, House of Commons Chamber:

As Penny (Mordaunt) alluded to, we all face a backlash, because, deep down there, the attitude of some is: "Why are women out there speaking in public? Shouldn't they be at home looking after their husband? Shouldn't they be in the kitchen? Why are they in Parliament?" There is always a backlash of threats and verbal threats, but also abuse on social media and in the mainstream media as well.

I think it is important that we say to ourselves and to one another that that is not something that we should just expect, or that is normal or an occupational hazard. We should say that to attack us as individuals is not only wrong but an attack on democracy, because we are elected. Our voters have elected us, and they are entitled to our getting on with our job without let or hindrance and without looking over our shoulder. Sometimes, if we are threatened or attacked, we feel that we cannot speak out about it because we do not want to look weak or as though we are preoccupied with ourselves. However, we have to speak out about it, because they are attacks not only on us but on our democracy.

We have to challenge the backlash. Every time women make some steps forward, there are people trying to push us back, so we have to remain persistent. We have to work with women's organisations outside and within our own political parties. However, we also have to work across parties. As women, if we work together across parties, we can make more progress than we can on our own. We also have to work with men who are prepared to support us. When I was first in the House of Commons, there were virtually no men who supported women's equality. However, there are now men who understand the importance of women's equality and who are prepared to support that agenda.

13th September 2018:

Business Questions

Following incident of protestor shouting at Jacob Rees-Mogg and his children

Harriet Harman:

I should also like to return to a matter that was raised with her by the shadow Leader of the House—namely, what happened to the children of the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) yesterday, which we saw videoed and broadcast on the internet. Every Member across the House that I have spoken to has, without exception, been dismayed and appalled by what happened. Targeting a Member through their children is not about free speech or the right to protest; it is intimidation and harassment, and it is undermining our democracy. None of us wants to be featherbedded or protected from the public, but we are elected to come here to do our job and we must be allowed to do that without let or hindrance.

I ask the Leader of the House to consider—if it is acceptable to the Speaker and to the shadow Leader of the House—taking an approach on a cross-party basis with widespread deliberation and having a Speaker’s conference on this issue. In this age of social media, we have to know what we and our families should be expected to put up with in the name of democracy and what crosses the line. We all saw this incident, but we know that it is not the only one that has happened. Also, these incidents involve not only children but frail, elderly parents. We are very good at championing the protection of the emergency services and the police, as we have seen in the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), because they are important for this country, but our democracy is also important for this country, so may we ask the Speaker to have a conference so that the line can properly be drawn?

Andrea Leadsom

I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Lady for raising this issue. A number of Members on both sides of the House have also raised it with me. It is utterly appalling that someone can attack a serving Member of Parliament through their children or their parents, or even through their partner or their best friend. It is absolutely unacceptable, and we have to join together in condemning it wherever it happens. I am certainly very sympathetic to her suggestion, and I am sure that you will be too, Mr Speaker.

I can tell the right hon. and learned Lady that the Government launched a consultation on 29 July on a new electoral offence which aims to crack down on threats and abuse towards those standing for election. We need to change the way in which the public perceive those who stand for public office, not least because we want to encourage more good—and, particularly, young—people from all walks of life who want to take part in our public life. How can they possibly be attracted to it when this kind of appalling behaviour goes unchecked?

17th May 2018

Extract from the Freedom of Speech: Universities, Joint Committee on Human Rights report debate in Westminster Hall

Harriet Harman:

...someone who is wearing a mask breaking into a meeting and threatening people, so we have no truck with that. However infrequently it happens, it absolutely must be stamped down on...

We heard evidence from the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), who in February had gone to speak at a meeting of the politics and international relations society of the University of the West of England in Bristol...people with scarves over their faces and wearing dark glasses burst into the room. They were shouting that the hon. Gentleman was a bigot and various other insults and, as he made clear, it was evident that they just wanted to stop the event. There were 300 people there who wanted to engage in a serious discussion and four or five people who were determined to disrupt it. That is totally unacceptable, whether or not they are students.

21st March 2018

Extract from the Freedom of Speech: Universities, Joint Committee on Human Rights report, pp25

Re: “Protestors” wearing balaclavas disrupting and threatening MPs at meetings:

While some level of peaceful protest should be allowed, the levels of disruption in the above incidents are unacceptable and contrary to the university’s obligation to secure freedom of speech within the law under the 1986 Act. They could also interfere with (the speakers’ and attendees’) Article 10 rights under the ECHR to “receive and impart information and ideas.” Students and student union representatives have the right to freedom of association and expression, which are protected by Article 10 and 11 of the ECHR, and can cover forms of peaceful protest. However, it is unacceptable for protestors to deliberately conceal their identities, break in with clear intention to intimidate those exercising their rights to attend meetings or to seek to stop events. Universities have a statutory duty to initiate disciplinary measures if individual students or student groups seek to stop legal speech, or breach the institution’s code of conduct on freedom of speech. The police should take appropriate action against individuals committing criminal acts in the course of protests.

6th February 2018:

Women’s Suffrage Centenary debate, HoC Chamber

Harriet Harman:

Thank you, Mr Speaker. May I commend the right hon. Lady for her assertion that although as women, inside and outside the House, we have made tremendous progress, we still have so much further to go?

May I also say that I fully support the Government’s move to ask the Law Commission to consider the case for making it an offence to threaten and abuse parliamentary candidates?

This is about misogynists seeking to silence women who dare to speak out—it is particularly virulent against younger women and black women. Voters have the right to choose whoever they want, man or woman, to represent them, and once that representative is elected to Parliament it is their right and duty to be able to get on with the job without being subjected to intimidation, threats or violence. This is about our democracy, so I hope Members in all parts of the House will give it their full support.

Amber Rudd

I thank the right hon. and learned Lady for her comments, and I am full of admiration for the work that she did in Government to promote the role and the importance of women's working lives. That goes absolutely to the core of the argument for wanting more women MPs and more women in Government, because only then do we get Government's application to and attention on the improvements that need to take place. I thank her for her support in this area and I completely share her view—this is an attack on women; it is a sexist attack. We have seen an escalation of it over the past few years. It is not good enough for people to say, as some do, "You're in politics. You must accept it." We do not accept it. We will take action to stop it, and we will push for cultural change.

20 June 2016

Tributes to Jo Cox, House of Commons

Harriet Harman

I want to add to the very moving tributes to Jo. I got to know Jo after the 2010 general election, when she was elected to chair Labour Women's Network, which she did for four years. She would regularly burst into my office with that extraordinary energy she had and tell me all that they were doing to help Labour women get elected to Parliament to give women a bigger voice in the party. So many of the Labour women here in this Chamber today who were elected in 2015 and who are so deeply mourning Jo's loss were women whom, under Jo's leadership, Labour Women's Network helped and supported.

Not long after she had her son, she came to give me one of those regular briefings, and, of course, the baby came too—I remember it because she literally did not stop kissing him all the way through the meeting. When she had her daughter, she was still there for the women who were trying to become candidates—texting them support, phoning to commiserate if they did not make it, urging them to try again. Her feminism—her solidarity with other women—was a thread that ran through her and all her work in her community and for humanitarian causes. She always said to me emphatically that her children were her priority above everything. But there was no dividing line between Jo's maternal heart and her great political heart. Her children will grow up to know what an amazing woman their mother was. She is such a great loss to our politics; and an irreplaceable loss to her family, to whom we send our heartfelt sympathy.

List of organisations and stakeholders involved:

- House of Commons Commission – Chair, Rt Hon John Bercow MP, Speaker of the House of Commons
- Leader of the House, Rt Hon Jacob Rees-Mogg MP
- Committee on Standards – Chair, Kate Green MP
- Committee of Privileges – Chair, Kate Green MP
- Procedure Committee – Chair, Sir Charles Walker MP
- Parliamentary Labour Party – Chair, John Cryer MP
- 1922 Committee – Chair, Sir Graham Brady MP
- Home Affairs Select Committee - Chair, Rt Hon Yvette Cooper MP
- Joint Committee on Human Rights – Chair, Harriet Harman MP
- Women and Equalities Select Committee - Chair, Rt Hon Maria Miller MP
- The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee – Chair, Damian Collins MP
- APPG on Women in Parliament – Chair, Vicky Ford MP
- Women’s Parliamentary Labour Party - Chair, Jess Phillips MP
- Rt Hon Kenneth Clarke MP, Father of the House of Commons
- Rt Hon Nicky Morgan MP, Secretary of State for Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport
- Tom Watson MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport
- Joanna Cherry MP, SNP Home Affairs Spokesperson
- Ed Davey MP, Liberal Democrat Home Affairs Spokesperson
- Serjeant-At-Arms, Mohammed Amal El-Hajji
- Parliament Security Department
- Metropolitan Police
- Police Chiefs’ Council and local UK police forces
- Crown Prosecution Service – Director of Public Prosecutions, Max Hill QC
- Civil courts in relation to injunctions
- Criminal courts in relation to sentencing
- Equality and Human Rights Commission

For more information contact Rachel Smethers: rachel.smethers@parliament.uk

07852213922 / 0207 219 2057