

Speaker's Conference

Oral evidence: Speaker's Conference on the security of candidates, MPs and elections, HC 570

Wednesday 5 February 2025

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Members present: Sir Lindsay Hoyle (Chair); Mr Clive Betts; Kirsty Blackman; Zöe Franklin; Leigh Ingham; Jessica Morden; Ben Obese-Jecty; Rebecca Paul; John Slinger; Mark Tami; Sammy Wilson; Sir Jeremy Wright.

Questions 1-44

Witnesses

[I](#): Ellie Reeves MP, Chair, Labour Party; Andrew Whyte, Executive Director, Governance and Legal, Labour Party; Bob Blackman MP, Chair 1922 Committee, Conservative Party; and Stephen Massey, Former Chief Executive Officer, Conservative Party.

[II](#): Jeremy Corbyn MP, Independent; and Iqbal Mohamed MP, Independent.

[III](#): Mike Dixon, Chief Executive Officer, Liberal Democrats; and Elfrede Brambley-Crawshaw, Elections Manager, The Green Party.

[IV](#): Owen Roberts, Chief Executive Officer, Plaid Cymru; Timothy Johnston, Chief Executive, DUP; and Colin McGrath MLA, Chair, SDLP.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Ellie Reeves MP, Andrew Whyte, Bob Blackman MP and Stephen Massey.

Chair: Good afternoon everyone, and welcome. Before we begin, I would like to ensure that everyone is clear that, while we are holding our meeting in private to enable free and frank discussion, a transcript is being produced and will be published in due course, with the redaction of any sensitive information, which witnesses will have an opportunity to review. Before we start, does everybody know everybody? We have Bob, Stephen, Ellie and Andrew. Let's kick off with Rebecca, please.

Q1 **Rebecca Paul:** Thank you so much for your time today. Can I start by asking you how it felt to campaign in the 2024 election, and was it different to previous years? Shall we start with Bob and then work across?

Bob Blackman: Personally, the campaign was very much directed in an orderly fashion in my constituency, but I am very well aware that candidates across the country had terrible times. I have to say that, in my experience, from the complaints I have heard, in the main, female candidates experienced terrible misogyny and abuse from various different groups. That is something that we have got to put a stop to, without question, because it is discouraging women from coming forward as candidates, and we are not protecting them when they are indeed standing for election, which is absolutely their democratic right.

Stephen Massey: In my case, in my own somewhat limited campaigning—I am obviously not a candidate or an MP—the experience I had was normal. But clearly, from the input from MPs and candidates, for certain people campaigning—as Bob says, especially women, and where there was a Muslim minority that was very vocal and very concerned about the Gaza matter—I think there were a lot of issues, and that was maybe also the case for the Labour party. Those were the two areas that I would say were particularly different from previous elections.

Ellie Reeves: In my own constituency, there was nothing markedly different, other than my changed behaviour. For example, I did not do any hustings, because I felt that the security issues would have outweighed the benefit of doing hustings. That does then impact how you reach and communicate with your electorate.

Certainly, experiences from around the country felt very different to previous elections. We ended up setting up a risk register at the Labour party to monitor concerns of candidates because of the extent of feelings of harassment and abuse. We recorded 40 security incidents between the end of May and 4 July. They ranged from things like death threats, to intimidation at events and campaign sessions, and abuse on social media. It was more widespread, and it felt, anecdotally, much more widespread than in previous elections.



Andrew Whyte: I would echo the others' contributions. As Ellie said, we set up this risk register. This is the first time we have systematically monitored security incidents as a party. It is fair to say that, while there was a range of types of incidents that have different profiles in different types of constituencies, there was a marked correlation between security incidents involving women and particularly people from a black and minority ethnic background. I think it is fair to say that the anecdotal feedback we got from our campaigners and candidates was that the experience was, in places, very difficult, and much more so than it has been in previous elections.

Q2 Sammy Wilson: You say that you felt there was more abuse this time, or that there were harsher reactions to candidates. Was this on the doorstep, mostly through social media or in public meetings? Where did you find the unacceptable behaviour emerge most?

Bob Blackman: Without question, social media was much more abusive. Personally, the first thing I do in the morning is go through X, and mute or block anyone that is rude or abusive. I know that colleagues do that but, frankly, I have been doing it for donkey's years, and I just take it as part of the normal experience that we have as Members of Parliament. But, particularly for new candidates, who are not used to this, it is extremely intimidating; I think that is the biggest problem of all.

Q3 Sammy Wilson: Do you think the issue was that there were more new candidates who were not hardened to the normal responses that politicians get? Was it a perception, rather than a reality, that there was more of this?

Bob Blackman: I would also single out, which might be controversial, HOPE not Hate, who produced a booklet of disgraceful slurs, particularly against female candidates in the Conservative party, but Conservative men as well. It was not deliberately aimed at stirring up trouble, but without doubt it had an impact on the abuse that those candidates got during the election.

Stephen Massey: There is always a certain amount of abuse, but in some cases, on the street and on doorsteps, candidates who hold certain views were being accused of racism or of supporting one side or the other in the conflict in the middle east. Some of those behaviours were quite harassing and intimidating to candidates and MPs on—dare I say it—both sides. It happened a bit more than in previous elections, I would say, because of that issue.

Ellie Reeves: I think that abuse took place in a range of different places. For example, we heard of rallies—if you like—outside MPs' and candidates' offices, and harassment on the street. Of course, now, people have mobile phones and can start recording everything as well, which increases the intimidatory nature of it a little bit. In the run-up to the election, there were incidents of people turning up outside MPs' houses. That happened to both Conservative and Labour Members of Parliament, which is a very different thing to campaigning outside someone's office. This seemed to be

a new phenomenon, with mobs, groups, turning up outside people's home addresses, which is really intimidatory.

- Q4 **Leigh Ingham:** Some MPs have told me about this election being different, and the parties also campaigned differently, because there was a greater presence on social media, which led to increased awareness of who the local MP and the local candidates were than there maybe had been previously. Do you think that any of that contributed to the change in behaviours that you saw among constituents?

Ellie Reeves: I do not know that that is something I have necessarily thought about. I think it probably was because of social media and direct targeting. There was high recognition of candidates, particularly in target battleground areas. I do not know whether that led to more intimidation or less. It would be interesting to look at that in a bit more detail.

- Q5 **Ben Obese-Jecty:** I have a quick follow-up on the issue of people campaigning or demonstrating outside MPs' homes. Does either of the parties have a policy on how to liaise with the police and how to prevent that from happening going forward? There seems to be a trend that, once groups like that have realised that they have their foot in the door, so to speak, they will keep pushing it, and the problem will become worse.

Andrew Whyte: I can address that on behalf of the Labour party at least. Yes, we did liaise extensively with the police—both through PLaIT in Parliament and with individual police forces—in those circumstances. Obviously, we respect people's right to protest on issues that are important to them. However, we did draw a line at protesting outside MPs' homes, where the families were living and being intimidated as part of those demonstrations. We made a number of referrals to the police and liaised quite extensively in those circumstances.

To the extent that we can control our own members, we also took disciplinary action via the party's disciplinary procedures where our own members were found to have engaged in that behaviour.

Stephen Massey: We had a lot of engagement from the security services, the Home Office and the police. We had single points of contact at the Home Office—a go-to person, should there have been a problem. Likewise with local police forces in constituencies, there was an opportunity to go to individual support people. On how well that actually worked on the ground, the feedback has been a bit mixed. The party also had an email address—Report It—where people could report any events or problems.

The election was called, but we were going to have a little alarm system for candidates that would allow them, if they were really facing an imminent threat or danger, to press an alarm that would activate a response. So we were very aware of all the risks, and on the whole it seemed to go quite well, but MPs will obviously be the better judge of that.

Bob Blackman: There is a difference, as well, between an MP that is standing again and a new candidate coming in. I think there is a marked difference there, particularly in terms of long-standing MPs that were re-

standing, compared to, say, a new candidate coming in. I think that is something that has to be looked at as part of this review.

Ellie Reeves: I also think that there was not necessarily consistency between different police forces and how they dealt with some of these issues, with some being markedly better than others.

Q6 **John Slinger:** To what extent do you agree with the notion that the public's view of what constitutes their democratic right to engage with candidates has changed markedly? They actually think that some of these behaviours are perfectly legitimate—that it is legitimate to harass someone, running up and down the street, or outside their house. Do you think that has changed over time?

Bob Blackman: I think it has changed. Personally, not in this election but in previous elections, I have been assaulted on the street. You have to take that into account and always think of your security. I for one would never be out and about by myself, and I am sure other candidates have been in the same position. There is a feeling of, "There is a personal responsibility here, as well as a party responsibility."

I think it has got worse because people think it is fair game to harass people on the streets. Personally, I do not think it is fair game when you are going about your lawful business. However, the mood has changed, without a doubt, among certain groups of people.

Stephen Massey: I should add that social media and, in some ways, the media more generally have contributed to a hostile atmosphere around politicians that sort of excuses that sort of behaviour.

Ellie Reeves: Similarly, I would not go campaigning on my own; I would make sure there was someone always with me, travelling around as well. You just would not put yourself in that situation. I think that is a shift as well.

Q7 **Kirsty Blackman:** On the subject of the risk register and the 40 incidents that you logged, do you think that there was under-reporting? Are you going to keep the risk register up? If there is under-reporting, how will you ensure that more reports are made next time?

Andrew Whyte: It is the first time we have systematically assessed this in the course of an election campaign. I suspect that there probably is a bit of under-reporting. My experience is that politicians generally—candidates and parliamentarians—are pretty thick-skinned when it comes to this stuff. They will tend to take some of this behaviour as part of the cost of doing business in politics and may not think that it is something we can act on and support them with.

Yes, we will be maintaining the risk register for future elections, regardless of whether it is a general election or a set of local elections. We continue to produce guidance and resources for our candidates, and we will obviously encourage them to come forward, so that we can continue to build the evidence base and support them when these incidents happen.



Q8 Chair: Do you think that the parties should set up a code of conduct that candidates do not go beyond, to try to tone down the volume before we get to the election?

Stephen Massey: We have one, Mr Speaker—a very detailed one exactly on this matter. It is a code of conduct for members and representatives of the party that deals with the problems and that tries to moderate the language and set up respect. There have been some quite important disciplinary cases in the last two years in certain constituencies, where people have been disciplined for going further. We invoke the Nolan principles of good governance. There is quite a detailed code of what is expected, which contains the sorts of things that people would expect in terms of how candidates and members—this extends not just to MPs and candidates, but to members of the party—carry on their discourse on social media and elsewhere.

Ellie Reeves: The Labour party also has codes of conduct in the rulebook that members of the party have to abide by, and they face disciplinary action if they do not. That includes codes of conduct on social media usage and on bullying and harassment, and a pledge around treating others with dignity and respect. There are then higher standards for elected representatives. So we have those things as a party.

Q9 Chair: That is good about the candidates, but what about the parties themselves? I have a quick example, and hopefully we will not see it repeated. Individual MPs were targeted with their photograph, and underneath it said, “This MP wants your children to swim in sewage.” That really did cause a lot of problems for those MPs whose photograph was put up. MPs were also challenged: “Why does this MP want your children to starve?” I understand it is about winning elections, but I think there is a level. We tell candidates how to behave, but what about the parties that are doing the big machine work and advertising? On targeted seats that parties want to win, there seems to be a different degree of how far you can go, compared to those that are not due to be lost.

Ellie Reeves: Are you talking about a code of conduct between parties about campaigning?

Chair: It sets the level that is then repeated in exactly the way you started with—with social media picking it up and everyone just repeating it. Then it goes out and, before we know it, the families get targeted. To me, it is about debate on policies, not about individuals and what they voted for—“Your MP voted for your children to swim in sewage,” and then they name the MP and put his photograph up. Surprisingly, that was only in key seats—marginals.

Andrew Whyte: On the question of a mutually agreed code of conduct between parties, we would obviously be happy to engage in discussions. I would make a couple of observations. My worry, based on what we saw in the course of the election campaign—I take on board the points about the national campaign—is that when it comes to personal abuse and intimidation, what we tended to find, where there was a correlation with



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security incidents, was that it was largely people associated with independents campaigning on particular issues, who maybe did not have the same skin in the game as the established parties that engage in the democratic process on an ongoing basis. We tended to find that the examples of abuse, intimidation and harassment were more associated with those independent MPs, than with the main parties. My question would be, although you might get the main parties around the table to discuss a code of conduct, would it necessarily be reaching everyone who needs to be reached with that message?

The other point would be about enforcement of a code of conduct. Would it be contemplated that this was a statutory code of conduct or an agreement between parties? With things like this, you always have a problem with enforcement. A code might be helpful in setting a public benchmark of acceptable behaviour, which brings a certain degree of political pressure on those who sign up to it and those who do not. But, ultimately, you would probably want it to be enforceable in some way, and then the question would be, is it appropriate to put that on a statutory footing? Is there a possibility of agreeing something? There are questions around the practicalities of a mutually agreed code of conduct that it would be important to answer.

Bob Blackman: Our candidates certainly experienced attack ads, as you rightly said—

Chair: That is what I am getting to—

Bob Blackman: Clearly, they were out to cause a particular reaction in the voters' minds, but that also created hostility towards those individuals. If we could eliminate that, it would be very good news, because it is unfair on candidates and probably on the electorate, who are going, "What's this all about?" While I think it is fair to say that Labour candidates and MPs, in particular, were getting attacks from independents, our candidates were experiencing that from both the Liberal Democrats and the Labour party.

Ellie Reeves: I would urge some caution about conflating attack ads with intimidation outside people's houses and offices, and harassment on the street. I understand the point that is being made, but I am not sure that they are quite the same thing.

Chair: May I say why I think it is? What you do is, you put the attack advert up to stir up the people out there who read it, and then the children of the MP get it at school or outside, and it gets across to their homes, where people are protesting. Candidates were targeted because their photograph had been put up. The message was very clear; they were very emotive messages. I know it is about winning, but what level are you willing to dive to in order to win the seat?

What I am trying to do is to see if we can establish, between the senior parties, a code of conduct that does not drop below a level. When you are in opposition, life is easy; when you are in government, you are already on the back foot, because people are blaming you for everything already.



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What I want to try to do is to see if we can get the major parties to sign up to a code of conduct. We can then call out those who have not signed up, and we can call out those who are using a platform, by saying, "No, that is not the Conservatives. That is misinformation that is being put up by someone claiming to be them"—because we have a code of conduct.

I am trying to see if we can help each other to go forward, and not sink to a level of, "This seat must be won at any cost." I always say that people respect us better if we treat each other with respect. If we are intolerant and not respectful, do not be surprised when the public copy exactly the way that we treat each other. It is just whether you could think about that and whether it could be brought up.

Mark Tami: On that point, I think we have to be honest as well, as someone who was a target in 2019 and got attack ads constantly, that there are also front organisations—let's be honest—that are set up in order to deliver that message. Those will quite often go further than the main party. In 2019, because of my views on Brexit, I was called a traitor and various other things. I think language is important. We might disagree about Brexit, one way or the other, but—whether it is Brexit or any other issue—when we drift into using words like "traitor", that is different from saying, "You're wrong," or, "You're right," or whatever. I think that leads to the danger of more—

Chair: It is the pile-ons that come on the back of it; that is the point I was trying to make. Right, we have to make some progress. Jeremy?

Q10 **Sir Jeremy Wright:** Let me take you back to the experience of candidates and the response of your respective parties to that. Can I ask you about the support that you offer to candidates? You have all been very clear about the nature of the problem, and Bob has made the point, which I think everybody agrees with, that it is worse for certain kinds of candidates—women in particular, and those from ethnic minorities—than for others. Can I ask you to say something about the support you offer to candidates, and whether you target that support at those candidates who you think are more likely to be vulnerable? If you do, how successful is that targeting? Ellie, do you want to start? I am happy—as I am sure you are, Mr Speaker—for one of each pair to speak, if you want to, rather than everybody.

Ellie Reeves: We provided guidance, training, briefings and materials on security and dealing with abuse and intimidation. We also had to advocate on behalf of candidates. There was a big job of work, in some cases, in having to advocate to local authorities and to the police.

A number of our candidates ended up having to have close protection officers with them throughout the campaign, and that was something that the party was able to advocate and sort out by liaising with the police and the Home Office. I think that was unique to this election; I don't think that that had happened in previous elections. I don't think there had been the need for that at previous elections, but a number of our candidates did have to have close protection with them all the time. It was also just

helpful to have a kind of single point of contact, with Operation Bridger and the police, so that those kinds of arrangements could be made.

It was also just about things like using contacts from social media platforms to make sure that requests to take down intimidatory posts were dealt with. We have talked already about the risk register that we held, as well as providing specialist legal support on things like election law and what was potentially not illegal, for example. I think that that was a bigger operation—Andy might be able to say more about this—than we have ever had to put in place as a party before, particularly with the conversations with the police and the Home Office, which were happening all the time during the campaign.

Sir Jeremy Wright: I think it is helpful for us to understand the degree to which this was the Labour party assisting candidates—perhaps even advising candidates that they ought to take advantage of this—and to what extent it was candidates reaching out on their own, or being directly offered it. I am just interested in your sense of how much the party was involved in that, and how much it was positive advocacy for some of these measures.

Ellie Reeves: The party was involved a huge amount in that positive advocacy. I do not know of any candidates who just, of their own initiative, ended up getting a close protection officer, for example, because of representations that they had made. That came through the party, and it was something that the party was able to get put in place through those conversations with the Home Office, police, and so on.

Q11 **Sir Jeremy Wright:** Fair enough. Andrew, do you want to add to that, or does that cover it?

Andrew Whyte: Just to follow on from Ellie, dealing with this occupied a significant amount of my time, and the time of a number of colleagues, during the course of the campaign. As Ellie said, we worked with the Home Office extensively on security issues, and they were actually incredibly helpful, although the police response was a little more mixed in different areas.

I do not think that many, if any, candidates would have unilaterally sought out that sort of support, so I think that the parties have a role to play in liaising and advocating on our candidates' behalf.

Q12 **Sir Jeremy Wright:** Understood. The same question to Bob and Stephen—again, if you can pick up the aspects of physical security and of online threat, and what advice you offer on those, that would be helpful.

Stephen Massey: The advice we gave was quite extensive. There was a different level of response from MPs and candidates. Some people felt vulnerable and were keen to engage—came to training sessions, communicated with us—and others did not, but we certainly provided a manual on safety guidance. We communicated a lot with our female candidates—we have a dedicated person in Leeds who handles those matters. We did get help from the Home Office, and the police, which was,

as we have said, mixed. There was the ability to report things and for CCHQ to respond. Also on social media, the Report It email address was designed for if people felt that something had happened on social media that was abusive, misinformed or false. We would then potentially take that on to the platforms and ask them to take it down, correct it, and so on.

Q13 Sir Jeremy Wright: What was your sense of the response you got from the platforms? Good, bad or indifferent.

Stephen Massey: It varied depending on the platform. Some were really poor and others a bit better. How responsive they were, and how much they cared about us coming to them, varied. Overall, I think there was a good level of proactivity from the party, given the level of threat, but maybe some lessons learned for next time as well.

Q14 Leigh Ingham: Ellie, you touched on this slightly, so thank you. What does your party do to ensure its own members' actions do not cross the line into abuse or intimidation, whether of members or other parties?

Andrew Whyte: Ellie has already referred to our codes of conduct, which form part of our rule book and the contractual relationship between the party's members. That covers bullying and harassment. We also have the member's pledge, and an enhanced version for elected representatives, which sets out what we consider to be the minimum standard of behaviour for our own members, plus a social media code of conduct as well.

We are clear that any breach of those codes of conduct constitutes a breach of the party's rules, and would be investigated and dealt with as part of our disciplinary policies accordingly. We have taken disciplinary action against a number of our members who have been found to have abused, intimidated or harassed not just fellow members, but members of the public and people involved with other political parties. If there are breaches of those codes of conduct, we enforce them without fear or favour.

Stephen Massey: We had some quite controversial cases. Senior local Conservative officers, council leaders, were suspended for going too far on campaign materials—against the Labour party—and people were disciplined, because our panels, which are independent, decided that they went beyond the scope of the Nolan principles and crossed the line, so we took action.

Bob Blackman: I think it is fair to say that, internally, within the party, those actions are taken—probably in the Labour party as well—but they will not be publicised. Therefore, you would not have necessarily seen what action was taken, but as a board member of the party, we routinely see the results of disciplinary action and the action taken against individuals because of what they have done.

Ellie Reeves: Similarly in the Labour party, we have a disciplinary and disputes committee that deals with such issues.

Q15 Sammy Wilson: Is there any central vetting of the literature used by your candidates to ensure that the kind of things that Mr Speaker talked about do not get into it?

Ellie Reeves: Most of the templates would be centrally produced. There will be advice on what sort of things should go into the leaflets, depending on the constituency. Leaflets should also go through our regional offices for sign-off. For example, all my literature would go to the regional director to make sure that they are happy with it before it is sent to print, so that is the process. Sometimes it does not quite go according to plan, but that is the process that we put in place for the election.

Bob Blackman: We have a process by which, certainly close to general elections, everything that is going out with the party logo on has to be signed off. I am sure that it is a great frustration to candidates—my colleagues are nodding around the room. That is a process to ensure that nothing defamatory would actually be issued. You cannot govern what someone might do at a local level without that approval, but frankly that would be incredibly exceptional—certainly for us.

Q16 Leigh Ingham: Would your party support some kind of process for independently investigating allegations that party members have breached your policies on threatening or intimidating conduct?

Stephen Massey: We have an independent process. We have independent panels that are independent from the political leadership, and they tend to be barristers and lawyers. Of course, they are unconnected with the complainant and the respondent. We have had that for a few years now and it has been operating well, and of course sometimes it is quite controversial within the party.

Ellie Reeves: Similarly, we have independent processes. We have the national executive committee, the national constitutional committee and regional boards, and we can convene panels to deal with any of these sorts of issues, so we have robust processes in place.

Q17 Chair: We are really up against time. If there is anything we did not ask that you feel is important, please send that through to us—we would be really grateful. If there is anything that you reflect on later, please let us know. Thanks for joining us; it was really good to see you.

Bob Blackman: I have circulated to colleagues and ex-colleagues the fact that we are having this hearing, and I asked them to send me details of anything that happened. We will compile that and submit it.

Chair: That is brilliant. Thanks for that.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Jeremy Corbyn MP and Iqbal Mohamed MP.

Chair: I welcome you both; it is good to see you, Jeremy and Iqbal. Before we begin, I would like to ensure that everyone is clear that, while we are holding our meetings in private to enable free and frank discussion,



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a transcript is being taken. Transcripts will be published in due course with the redaction of any sensitive information, which witnesses will have an opportunity to review. Iqbal and Jeremy, we are going to kick straight off, if that is all right.

Q18 Jessica Morden: Thanks for coming in. We would be really interested to hear about your experiences of campaigning as independents and how not having a party structure affects your security, both in the election and as a sitting MP. It is good that you both have different perspectives, with Jeremy returning and Iqbal being a new candidate.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thanks for inviting us. We have discussed this beforehand and agreed to speak at breakneck speed to get as many questions in as possible, so we will get into it.

I have obviously been a Labour candidate on many occasions, both local government and parliamentary, and before that I was a Labour party agent, so I am very used to elections and election processes. It is completely different running as an independent because you have no national organisation or back-up. You are at an immediate disadvantage because party spending is nationally separated from constituency spending, but we have no party back-up. Therefore, there is no advantage from the national advertising campaign.

Secondly, I know you are mainly concentrating on issues of security of candidates. I have always had a good relationship with the local police, both at the formal level with the borough commander and the local level with the extremely helpful safer neighbourhood teams. I sometimes find that the communication between here and the local police is not as good as it should be and that often becomes confusing.

It would be helpful, in relations with the local police, if we made it a requirement that in every local authority area there is a designated police officer who is responsible for communication with candidates and agents—both for security and for issues of electoral law and breaches of electoral law because, in my experience, most police officers have not got a clue what electoral law is. They have no idea who is and is not allowed in a polling station and so on. They sort of play it by ear and then it can often end up in a very bad situation where it is about who knows who and the rules are not followed.

On security itself, I personally do not like being surrounded by security people all the time. It makes me feel uncomfortable; it is not what politics should be. We should not have to have a couple of heavies walking around with us whenever we walk down the street—I absolutely hate that. When I am going to places or things where the local police think there could be a problem, I do get House of Commons security and I have to say, they are very good, very helpful, and very easy to work with—I really appreciate them. Hopefully, they are also as discreet with everybody else as they are with me, because the last thing I want is heavies around me all the while.



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It is different being an independent. The other thing is, if you are in a party structure as a candidate, you would know most of the people around you and you would know who was involved—your canvassers and so on. As an independent, you know a lot, but not all of them.

I was very conscious of the need to make sure that anyone knocking on doors on my behalf was knocking on doors on my behalf, not somebody else's. That even happens in parties—I can give you some stories about Labour campaigns, but I will not today; there is not time. I had a very efficient core team who would train everybody who offered to canvas, but we would only send people we did not know out with somebody we did know, so that there was a monitoring arrangement, which also helped security.

There were some concerns about the security of people knocking on doors. Again, I just think that there has to be a good relationship between the returning officer, the police, and the local campaigns to make sure that people understand that we have a perfect right to knock on doors. It is not an intrusion in people's lives—that is what an election and a democracy should be about. So I think we should be quite robust about the idea that candidates and their representatives can go around knocking on doors, because that is surely what a participatory democracy is about.

Iqbal Mohamed: I am a first-time, newbie MP. I had never run for office before. It was just a maze and a mystery from day one. Knowing that I had to go and fill in the form, pay the deposit and get registered as a candidate, I expected some kind of induction pack, with dos and don'ts, guidance, contact numbers for security, police, returning officer, Electoral Commission—but none of that was provided. It was not provided to me and, having consulted with the other independents, not to them either.

I was lucky to have had an agent who had run the previous local election campaign for one of the councillors, so had experience around the process. I had one email from the police saying, "We understand you're a candidate and you can contact us here if you need." It is things like being put on patrol plans and given guidance on the dos and don'ts around knocking, going to certain areas and being alone or not alone.

Thankfully, I did not feel unsafe at any point during the campaign, and I just want to get that on record. There were not any threats or issues. I was never on social media until I started my campaign and I stayed off it as much as I could. There may have been rude words or threats on there that thankfully did not transpire into anything. I think having that introduction to law enforcement or a security person, whether they are in the police or not, it needs to be somebody who is really knowledgeable.

The other part that we learned, and this applies to all four independents, although maybe not to Jeremy, was that people were surprised that we were standing as independents. The mainstream parties did not take too well to that, which they did not need to—the people were going to decide who they wanted to elect. Rumours, semi-allegations and other allegations were shared online with people away from the campaign, and away from



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me. We did not become aware of many things until post-election when it all came out in the press. There is a feeling in the independent newbies, the first-timers, that there is a heightened level of threat. It is maybe not a physical threat or a threat to our security, but it is reputational, from being accused or having to defend and fend back, and trying to find out.

Unlike Jeremy, who the world knows and he knows all his constituents, we had new campaign teams and new volunteers, and we did not know all of them. We did not have any vetting processes. We set our plans, rules and materials, and we wanted to engage constituents and give answers with a Q&A, and then bring back questions that we needed to have an answer for. We had people from out of town coming, and again there were no issues, and they were all polite and did it the right way. But, as I say, post-election we heard accusations and allegations. It is very easy for candidates to allege things against somebody else, I understand. There is no blowback from that, and there is no way to hold them accountable for personal statements that are directed at the candidate and that can impact their standing in the community and their reputation. Without party machinery or lawyers to advise and send retraction letters, it was quite challenging.

Post election, I have had the same positive experience of engaging with parliamentary security for events and surgeries, so I really want to extend my gratitude for that. However, one of the candidates recently got elbowed outside Parliament and sworn at. He also had a couple of challenges booking security for a visit to a mosque that he was not familiar with, and he just wanted that extra reassurance.

Q19 Jessica Morden: For the fully new independents, did you all only receive one email from the police, or was it varied?

Iqbal Mohamed: That is what I remember, and I have had not found anything else. There were no packs, contact numbers or people to follow up with.

Jeremy Corbyn: I hope a recommendation that you come up with is that when someone is nominated as a candidate, from any party, the returning officer makes sure that they are fully apprised of and provided with at least a booklet on electoral law, and also pointed in the direction of the relationship with the police and security. My own returning officer in Islington town hall is superb and she did all that, but I am not sure it is the norm around the whole country. I suspect that we probably do it rather better than many others, and I get that feeling from talking to colleagues around here.

Chair: We need to push on quickly.

Q20 John Slinger: Jeremy has already touched on this, but I will ask anyway. What do you think independent candidates could do to help to ensure that their supporters engage with political opponents in a constructive manner? You have already touched on it by talking about training and letting people go out with an experienced person who you know, but do you think



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perhaps a voluntary code of conduct for independent candidates, or all candidates, might help?

Jeremy Corbyn: I think a code of conduct is helpful, but it is no more than that. It is not law or legally enforceable; it is merely a code of conduct. Again, the returning officer has to be careful that they do not step over the boundary, but when you are trying to organise a debate or something between candidates, there is nothing wrong with the agents getting in touch with each other. It does not do any harm, and it is a normal, sensible thing to do. But I think a code of conduct on behaviour is good.

Personally, I have always tried to make the vast majority of any election material I send out positive rather than negative. I think the public are totally put off by negative campaigning and they are more interested in the positive. In this campaign I did almost no negative at all; it was all positive about what the offer was, and I think that is the way it should be. You can't set that down in law, set it in stone or even cover it in a code of conduct. It is a question of attitude and approach to politics.

Iqbal Mohamed: Just to reiterate that I think a code of conduct would help, but it has to be enforceable and consistently applied to all candidates from all parties. As independents, we got an impression that we were being held to a different standard than other candidates in the run-up to this election, or even in past elections. I think it would help, but it needs to have teeth.

Q21 **Kirsty Blackman:** On that, independents have historically done much better when there are specific local issues or when emotive things are happening in those local communities. How do you think it should be ensured that the rhetoric is kept down within acceptable bounds for the people who are campaigning for the independents, the independents themselves and those from other parties who may be unhappy about the independents standing?

Jeremy Corbyn: It is a hard thing to decide, because candidates get very excited and they think that their personal animosity towards other candidates is somehow shared by the entirety of the population, but it does not always work like that. A lot of the public get very put off by it. It is hard to know how you can put it down. An early meeting, as soon as nominations have closed, between all candidates and agents is a good idea. You cannot force them to attend, but in my experience—I have done 14 election campaigns in various ways—they usually all attend, which I think is a good thing that helps to dial down the rhetoric.

It also helps if all parties agree that they will take part in public debate, because not taking part in public debate really does irritate people. You might feel as a sitting MP that you are above all this, but you are not. You are there as a candidate, exactly the same as any other candidate that time, and there should be public debates between candidates.

Iqbal Mohamed: To add to that, my team and the other independents referred more to the policies of the parties to which the candidates



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belonged. There was no literature or comment on an individual in any of our campaigns. Although there was a key issue that culminated in our election, we are all extremely proud to be MPs—to represent all our constituents and to stand for all the issues that matter to them, whether they are local, national or international. It is an absolute privilege. Ultimately, there has to be a way for the electorate as a whole to communicate their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the Government or the policies of parties in the right way. Mostly, I think that was done in our campaigns.

Q22 Chair: Thanks for that, and thanks for what you have done. Jeremy, if there is anything you would like to put on the record that we have not asked, would you please send it through to us, on behalf of the other independents as well?

Jeremy Corbyn: Do you want a statement from us to summarise what we have said today? Would that help?

Chair: That would be really good.

Jeremy Corbyn: The five of us had quite a long discussion this morning, which Iqbal and I thought we should do as a way of consultation before coming here. We will happily send you a statement.

Chair: Please, with anything that you feel you would like to add.

Jeremy Corbyn: Is there a timetable for that?

Chair: I always say sooner rather than later.

Jeremy Corbyn: As with everything.

Chair: Absolutely. Thanks for joining us today. We really appreciate it.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Mike Dixon and Elfrede Brambley-Crawshaw.

Chair: Good afternoon, and welcome. Before we begin, I would like to ensure that everyone is clear that, although we hold our meetings in private to enable free and frank discussion, a transcript is being taken. Transcripts will be published in due course, with a redaction of any sensitive information. Witnesses will have the opportunity to review the transcript. Finally, I note for the record that Reform was invited to join the panel but was unable to put forward a witness. We invite Reform to answer questions in writing.

Elfrede and Mike, welcome. We will kick straight off as we are up against the time.

Q23 Rebecca Paul: Thank you for your time today. Will you talk a little about how you felt that the campaign in 2024 went? Did it feel different from previous years' campaigns and, if so, will you talk a little about what you think was driving any negative or positive aspects of that?



Elfrede Brambley-Crawshaw: The previous two elections were very challenging for the Green party. Lots of big issues like Brexit had made our candidates a bit of a target. We were expecting that this time—we were prepared for it—but we did not have the same kinds of problems. We just did not seem to be on the back end of incredibly emotive issues which usually cause that kind of behaviour.

Having said that, our candidates have said, and we have seen, that for women on social media, there are new issues. They really felt under pressure, and it changed some of their behaviour and whether they were willing to stand again. It is a tale of two halves.

Mike Dixon: I strongly agree with that. We have potentially the same story. The two things that I would add are that I think we got better as a party, certainly between 2019 and 2024, at talking with our activists. Post covid, a lot of people embraced Zoom and had a different kind of communication, so the channels inside the party were easier to deal with and to escalate complaints.

This time, we had four PPCs who had specific incidents. We raised those with the police, and the police took them seriously and dealt with them quickly. The other thing that I thought worked better in this last Parliament was that the police, the security services and the House authorities were more joined up in terms of the guidance they gave us in advance. They worked with us more clearly in advance and produced guidance that was consistent and compatible, which we could get through to people. It honestly felt better this time, in terms of the political context and of other organisations' capability to respond, as well as our own.

- Q24 **Sir Jeremy Wright:** May I ask you both about the support you offer to your candidates to deal with the problems that you have just identified? Mike, you have said something about it already. Specifically, I think we are interested in knowing about what level of support you can offer your candidates when it comes to threats and harassment. Do you target that support? Do you try to identify candidates who might be more vulnerable because of certain characteristics, background or whatever and, if you do, do you feel that that targeting is successful? If you can include in your answer something about not only the physical aspects of security, but online security, and any advice and support you offer there, that would be helpful.

Mike Dixon: We regard it strongly as not our area of expertise, frankly. We will tend to pass on directly advice that we get from third parties, particularly the police, the security services and the work of Parliament and the House. We provide an outsourced mental health—talking therapies—helpline, which we make available to all our candidates and MPs. The practical, physical security aspects we absolutely leave to the professionals, who are well equipped and qualified to deal with them.

We try to highlight to people that we think this is important and that they need to take a risk-based approach. Where there are issues, that is particularly around hustings. In a couple of places, at public hustings,



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people had the impression that they were being followed by a particular person back to their car—that happened to two or three of our candidates, with separate people following them—and our relationship and ability to get in touch with the police was really good.

The leader of our party was provided with, in this case, private security. We had substantial problems with the private security that we were given, which compared much less favourably with the police response that we had in 2019, when the threat was judged to be much higher.

- Q25 **Sir Jeremy Wright:** When you say “substantial problems”, do you mean that they did not show up, or did they not do what you expected them to do when they did?

Mike Dixon: We had to make formal complaints about their behaviour.

- Q26 **Sir Jeremy Wright:** Really? Okay. Before I turn to Elfrede, what about online? Do you take the same view of online support—that in essence candidates should come to you—or do you offer something more proactive in support on online harassment or threats that they might receive?

Mike Dixon: We give people broad guidance on how to act online. Our view in general is that votes are won by talking to people offline, rather than online.

- Q27 **Sir Jeremy Wright:** Elfrede, on the same subject.

Elfrede Brambley-Crawshaw: Very similar. The police are the professionals on this issue, and we would defer to them and take their advice. We do a broad briefing to all candidates, or we offer that to all candidates, then depending on the particular circumstances, we offer different support. In areas where we have a good chance, it is more likely that our candidates will be up against it, so the support that the party gives would be different there.

Online, we prefer our candidates not to get involved in lots of discussion. We want them to be polite and respectful, and we encourage them just to put information out there, rather than getting involved in the nitty-gritty. Again, we think elections should be won on the doorstep and in the community, not in the online space. But we do think, having looked at lots of the feedback from a survey that we did in advance to prepare for this, that perhaps we need to give more firm guidance in future because our candidates are clearly worried about the abuse they get online, and it really is impacting the democratic processes.

- Q28 **Sir Jeremy Wright:** I have one other question in relation to any interaction that parties or individual candidates have had with online platforms. Has that been positive or negative—if you are aware of it? If there has been a problem online and someone has approached the individual service and said, “What can you do about it?”, do you have a sense of—



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Elfrede Brambley-Crawshaw: Entirely negative. I do not think any of our candidates have felt supported by the platforms. Our advice has been to remove themselves. We have had similar advice from the police as well.

Mike Dixon: I do not think the platforms view it as their job to protect prospective parliamentary candidates more than anyone else.

Q29 **John Slinger:** You have mentioned that online abuse might be impacting negatively the democratic process. Could you expand on that?

Elfrede Brambley-Crawshaw: I think this is the first election where it felt that it spilled out of the online space and into hustings and on to the streets. Arguments were repeated; campaigners might be shouted at in the streets, hearing the same things that they have heard online. Or there could be people with a platform in the community almost inciting behaviour from others, and it was not clear to us whether they were members or supporters from political parties. It is very hard to regulate and have any sort of control over.

Q30 **Chair:** Mike, do you want to add anything?

Mike Dixon: I re-emphasise the demographic point: we found that it made it harder to recruit people who were not white men to be candidates.

Q31 **Mark Tami:** Where do you think the line is between effective campaigning and unacceptable behaviour? Do you think that will be helped by a voluntary code of practice? I am thinking of—to use a football analogy—of instances where candidates are playing the man or the woman rather than the ball and are targeting personal attacks rather than policy.

Elfrede Brambley-Crawshaw: I do not know whose turn it is.

Chair: Please, go on. There are no turns; it is whoever wants to take it on.

Elfrede Brambley-Crawshaw: Passionate debate is really important. That is what we all want to safeguard, but there is a really clear line when you go over that. We do not need to mention names or individuals. It should be about policy. Violent debate that incites hatred feels like a line for us. Where community leaders, party leaders and other people with a significant profile join in, they need to be even more careful about what they say and how it is perceived by their supporters.

Mike Dixon: There is obviously a clear line when it is illegal or wrong. All parties make mistakes in terms of literature proofing and that kind of stuff—regrettably, particularly given that my name is on all our literature. We try quite hard to have proof checking where we get facts wrong. Sometimes those facts, I think from all parties, can lead to people getting a wrong impression, and that is regretful. We try hard to make sure that that does not happen—I think all parties do.

People are interested in people's character and their personal history, and whether they have chosen to live in a place for a long time. There are lots



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of things about someone that is important when deciding whether you want that person to do the job of representing you. We cannot entirely say it is about playing the ball, because the player does actually matter. You are picking the player as much as you are the team. But we need to be decent, and I think voters can tell and voters do not love it if you are consistently horrible. If you want to win, you have to show a range of emotion and subtlety, and respond to what people say.

The idea that we can get rid of negative campaigning or pointing out something about a candidate that they do not particularly want to be publicised is not realistic, and actually not that democratic. Clearly, if something is mendacious or brings a risk of actual harm to someone, we need to be extraordinarily careful and responsible about that. It is very hard to judge—it is subjective—and it rightly should be.

Elfrede Brambley-Crawshaw: There are areas that are obvious, though, such as bringing family into it. I didn't answer the second part of your question, which was would we sign a code of conduct.

Chair: If you feel you have missed anything, please write to give us further details. That would be very helpful.

Q32 **Kirsty Blackman:** I don't want to put words in your mouth, but you are saying that there is a difference between saying, "This party candidate doesn't live in the constituency and has no relationship with it," and saying something nasty about them. You are saying that those are two different things, and you think it is important to be able to say the factual bit—that the candidate from the Happy party does not live in the constituency.

Mike Dixon: Yes, or that they are saying they care about this thing, but they have never talked about it in the past, or their employment history would suggest that they do not have an interest in that thing. As a voter, you are trying to form a view on who this person is, what their instincts would be and how they would respond to something. All parties have a legitimate interest in trying to describe the character of the person who is representing them. Most people form decisions on character. The reason you are all here is that your constituents approve of your character. That is an important subject matter for legitimate democratic debate. We just have to avoid the risk of people getting hurt, and that is difficult.

Q33 **Leigh Ingham:** I have a couple of points. Could you write to us on your point about how someone's previous career might demonstrate how they are interested or not in areas—for example defence and national security—and the gamut of the whole role of an MP? It is interesting that you consider that to be relevant, in terms of character.

My main question is: what does your party do to ensure its own members do not cross the line into abuse or intimidation, either against other members of your party or members of other parties? In other words, do you tell candidates that for party members, certain approaches or materials are not applicable or appropriate for campaigning?

Chair: Who wants it first? Go on, Mike.



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Mike Dixon: We largely base it off template literature. We give people templates and say, "Here's what we think is appropriate and good," and people adapt those in places. Through that template literature and training, we try to give people what we think the appropriate balance of content is. Basically, very, very rarely in that template literature will there ever be anything personal. Generally, we don't think it is that effective.

In terms of people crossing the line, we have an independent complaints system, which is run by volunteers who are not allowed to hold political roles in the party. I do not get a say or a view on anything that happens in the complaints system. I think all parties have decided that that is relatively sensible. During a normal period, it is slightly slower to respond, but essentially the person running that has the ability to suspend someone immediately from the party if they think a threshold has been breached or there is a risk—if something is antisemitic or Islamophobic, or whatever it might be.

During a general election, we speed up that process quite a lot. We have 24-hour staffing of that function. The process requires fewer people to make a decision on suspension, and we are faster to suspend. We have a more precautionary approach to suspension because we recognise that the stakes are higher, and it is harder to do.

I would be the first to say that complaints systems in any organisation are quite hard to get right. They will always evolve, and we will always get better at it. As with many people, stuff like the ability to delete and provide screenshots is complicated and difficult, and you end up with quite long case files. That is essentially the tone that we take.

Elfrede Brambley-Crawshaw: We offer campaign advice to all our campaigns, and similarly templates, but also general campaign advice on how to conduct yourself. We want to be perceived as a nice political party, and that is part of our image, so we would like to uphold that. We have a code of conduct for all members. We will hold members to account on that for our complaint system, and we did that in the last election. All our candidates have to sign a code of conduct before standing in an election for the party.

Q34 **Jessica Morden:** On that, give us some examples of practical things you say to your supporters, as Greens, to make them behave well online during key seat elections, for instance in the last election.

Elfrede Brambley-Crawshaw: For a start, it will not help them win. People do not like it. We want to go out there and win elections. It is not just that it is not nice to behave like that; the public do not want to see it. They want to see campaigning that they can join in with. There is lots of encouragement to behave in a certain way.

Q35 **Jessica Morden:** Do you think the guidance you give works?

Elfrede Brambley-Crawshaw: In terms of running positive campaigns, yes, I do.

Q36 **John Slinger:** Would you concede that, very sadly, negative and untruthful campaigns by groups or individuals can be effective? That is a real problem for us, because we do not want to be like that, but others do.

Elfrede Brambley-Crawshaw: Yes, absolutely—particularly where it means that people step down. Mike made the point about white men having an easier ride in politics. Absolutely, negativity and violent discourse, or violence in election campaigns, make a big difference to the kind of democratic system we have. It is just whether as a political party we can reach the people doing that. We can call to account the behaviour of our members and known people, but beyond that, where do we have influence?

Mike Dixon: Something that we all come back to, as staff working for political parties, is that people who stand for election have put forward themselves in extraordinarily brave way that very few people working as staff do. We admire that a lot, and we are very aware of the bravery of doing it. We do not take lightly what it takes to do that. It is worth saying that party staff are really aware of that. There have been moments in the last five years when it has been particularly acute that you are taking a risk by standing, and in those moments, our staff are particularly aware of that. It is not something we take lightly.

Chair: Thank you for joining us. If there is anything you feel that should have been asked, please can you let us have a note of that and we will certainly put everything in? I thank you both for joining us.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Owen Roberts, Timothy Johnston and Colin McGrath MLA.

Chair: Good afternoon, welcome and thank you for joining us today, particularly Timothy and Colin, as I know the situation remains very challenging in Northern Ireland following the storm. Our thoughts continue to be with you and the communities affected.

Before we begin, I would like to ensure that everyone is clear that while we are holding our meetings in private to enable free and frank discussion, a transcript is being taken. Transcripts will be published in due course, with the redaction of any sensitive information, which witnesses will have an opportunity to review. Finally, I would like to note for the record that the SNP were invited to join this panel but were unable to put anyone forward at this moment, so we will invite them to answer their questions in writing.

I will start with Jessica Morden, and then I will bring in others. Jessica, shall we start with Plaid, or are you happy to take the first question? Then I will go to the others.

Q37 **Jessica Morden:** I have a very general opening question. How did it feel to campaign in the 2024 general election, and how did you feel that it was different from previous elections? Owen first, because I am Welsh too.



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Owen Roberts: Thanks very much for that. The overall impression that I am getting from speaking to our candidates and campaigners is that there are difficulties, but it is a bit better than 2017 and 2019, when there was a more divisive atmosphere, particularly around Brexit issues. The general impression that I am getting is that it is easier now than it was then. That is not to say that there are no issues. Online harassment is still quite a significant issue. It varies a great deal, but particularly—not exclusively, but particularly—for women candidates, that arena can be very challenging.

That is the overall impression. Sometimes, particular things around hustings can arise. Particularly if we have divisive issues in a locality around things like immigration, gender issues or that sort of thing, there can be a problem; the behaviour of people in hustings meetings can be an issue. But generally, the situation is a bit better than in the last two elections. That is the impression that I am getting.

Timothy Johnston: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your indulgence of the virtual option. Obviously, Northern Ireland is a little apart and we have had our own history and issues in relation to election campaigns. When I talk to members—both candidates and those who were elected again—there is a feeling that the temperature may have been slightly increased in the 2024 general election, not particularly because of issues per se, but because we are in a more interactive world.

Certainly there are specific issues that I would agree with Owen on. There is no doubt that there is an issue with online abuse—no doubt we will come back to that—particularly if you are a female candidate. There are issues where all our candidates felt more aware of safety issues than maybe had been the case before. But it depends. Some candidates have been through many election cycles and become more hardened to that. Others are new to it and find that it is sometimes a shock to the system. There is a variation of views in our ranks, but undoubtedly there are difficult issues that have to be confronted.

Colin McGrath: Can I ask you to repeat the question, because I dropped out and got just the end of it? I want to make sure that I get the nuance of it right for my reply.

Jessica Morden: It was a general question about how it felt to campaign in the 2024 general election and how that was different from other elections, or not.

Colin McGrath: Thank you very much. I would have the same response as Tim suggested. No matter what election it is in Northern Ireland, it is always fraught with a certain amount of difficulty. That has become just an accepted reality. Maybe the addition is with the progression of an online presence and social media; what you are exposed to as candidates has probably changed from previous elections. That seems to grow in terms of the impact but maybe not so much the protections. We will probably discuss that a bit more as the evidence session goes on. I do not

think 2024 was vastly different from other elections. It was still fraught with all the usual difficulties.

Chair: I am going to Zöe now, and we will come to Timothy first.

Q38 **Zöe Franklin:** This is an overarching question. What support do you offer the candidates for each of your parties and the MPs who are re-standing, to help them to avoid or deal with harassment and threats?

Timothy Johnston: Again, I have the caveat that we are a smaller, regional party, so there will be a sense that we know all our candidates and members well. When they are selected or re-selected as the case may be, we will have a number of internal sessions in which we will offer guidance. But whether what goes out is a candidate note, guidance from the Electoral Commission or the guidance for candidates in the election that was jointly produced by the PSNI, the Electoral Commission and the Electoral Office, it is obviously the case, because we are a smaller-knit party, that we are able to have those discussions, so immediately that there are issues or problems, they will be raised up the chain of command pretty quickly and allow a party-wide response. If that is on the wrong side of the line and it needs to involve the police, we will encourage and get involved in that and assure candidates. People will take different views depending on the issue.

We do give broader guidance in saying, "That is lone working," whether that is in terms of how you campaign or where you are. We would never encourage any of our candidates to go out on their own, although some will—that is ultimately an individual determination. We try in a collegiate fashion to gather round and give as much support as we can, as I say, whether that is guidance or individually having those collective conversations. When you are smaller, it is easier to do that and maybe less process driven, albeit there is a process element to it.

Colin McGrath: If Timothy represents a smaller regional party, I represent a smaller, smaller regional party, so much of what has been said there is the same. You have that greater sense of connectivity to your candidates. For example, if you are fielding only around 18 candidates in the general election, it is easy enough to be able to interact with people to provide updates, support and guidance.

Like any of us who have been through election processes, if things go wrong or if things are not going well, it can become a very lonely place very quickly. You therefore want to ensure that you have that ability to reach out for people and ensure that where there are candidates, even if they are a candidate on their own in a general election, for example, you have a good support mechanism round them and that they have good people with them who can reach out to them and can reach into the centre for support as well.

With 18 constituencies and 18 candidates, it is quite easy to be able to provide that simple information in a very streamlined and quick way. All your team will automatically know who the party managers are and who



they can turn to for support, so it is a bit easier on a smaller basis, but with the caveat that when things go wrong, you need to be nimble and quick at responding to any of the issues.

Owen Roberts: We have a similar experience in terms of the advantages of a small party and people knowing each other. There is that mutual support that we try to develop between our candidates, and, as the other two witnesses were saying, it is about having that link to head office and being able to activate it very quickly.

I will add on that point that between the main parties in Wales—I am not sure if this experience goes beyond there—we have quite a good relationship at an officer level. I am able to pick up the phone to the chief exec of the Welsh Conservatives or whoever and say, “Look—this problem has arisen in one constituency,” or something like that, and we are able to solve it amicably and without too much of a problem in most instances. In terms of the formal advice, we depend on the Electoral Commission guidance, which is quite strong in certain areas. In addition, there is guidance about how to behave online.

On training, the snap election hurt a bit. We had a training programme planned for the summer for our candidates in which some of this advice would have been covered, so we were not able to deliver that in quite the way that we had anticipated. That was a bit of a challenge and was not ideal, but I suppose we could do better; we will learn in terms of what we did well and what we did not do so well this year.

Q39 **Sammy Wilson:** Electoral contests are obviously very competitive in many seats that are marginal. The campaigns themselves can become quite robust. How would you draw the line between what parties might regard as effective campaigning and unacceptable conduct in the competition that is political involvement?

Chair: Can we start off with Timothy?

Timothy Johnston: That sounds a very philosophical question—I would expect no less from the Member for East Antrim. It is a very fair question.

First, we are standing on freedom of speech when we want to be in a position. Democracy is a robust exchange of ideas. When a candidate or a campaigner reaches a point where they feel threatened, and where a campaigning tool or rhetoric becomes toxic and not about an exchange of philosophies or ideas—where it plays the man or woman and not the ball, if I can say it in those terms—that crosses the line. Anything that the public and voters would view as disreputable or lowering the tone in broad political discourse is to be discouraged.

Northern Ireland has had a history of very robust discussion, and that is the nature of who we are and where we come from. I think in recent years there has been a greater effort to try to make sure that people do not feel uncomfortable, targeted or singled out, and that the rhetoric and campaigning tools do not become so harsh that people feel under threat,



whether that is to do with their physical wellbeing or mental wellbeing, particularly in the online field.

Sammy knows my view on this. Things are said anonymously online by campaigners for other political parties that most normal democratic structures or political parties would not subscribe to, and because it is done anonymously online, particularly during election time, it takes us well over the line of threatening behaviour. There is a real job of work to be done around that, because it seeps into the normal physical discourse.

Colin McGrath: I agree with everything Timothy just said, particularly the analogy. For me, it is about when you play the player and not the ball, because that is when you make it personal. That is when you make it about the individual as opposed to the offering that you are making to the electorate, which is what an election is supposed to be about: offering either more of the same or an alternative to what is there.

The thing that strikes me most is that we have almost become acclimatised, certainly as politicians, to being insulted, berated and harassed to the point where that is almost acceptable behaviour. The reality is that if that were in any other job or any other sphere, it would just not be tolerated. For example, I have sat on boards of school governors, and whenever a single tweet has been posted about a teacher, the school has rightly said, "We need to protect our member of staff, rebut what is here and report matters on." But when you as a politician have been out campaigning and you come home and open your phone, you get 50 or 100 remarks about you, and it's just like, "Oh well. I'll have to go to bed, get up tomorrow and campaign."

Maybe there is a job of work among us as a political class to say, "Do you know what? It isn't acceptable, and we need to draw a line as to what we are prepared to accept in terms of abuse." The connector to that is what will we be able to do about it if it happens, which may feed into the conversation about how we address what social media companies are allowing people, often in faceless posts, to put up about others.

Q40 **Chair:** That is great. Owen?

Owen Roberts: I agree with the other two speakers so I will not repeat them, but I would add that the online issue can be cumulative. We experienced that with some of our candidates during the last election, whereby an individual post would not in itself be constituted as harassment or whatever, but there would be a repeated pattern of behaviour of a group of people jumping on everything that a candidate posted online. However tame, however motherhood and apple pie that is, if you have a group of people attacking every single time, that can have a very undermining and intimidating effect on that person. We need to take into account that cumulative effect and how it can impact candidates.

The other thing is that I know there is legislation about making false statements, but in general, coming back to something Colin alluded to, our electoral law is not that well developed to deal with people making



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misleading statements, telling lies or saying something that is not just a difference of opinion but untrue. There is not really a clear comeback and clear accountability for that in electoral law, at least in a usable sense, without going into the whole mechanism around civil litigation and making false statements and that kind of thing. This can be quite difficult. If a candidate feels that a person or a newspaper even has made a false statement about them, how to get redress on that is complex.

- Q41 **Sammy Wilson:** Colin, as you were giving your answer you asked a question which was, "What can we do?" We sometimes accept this, but what can we do about it? You mentioned social media companies need to do something. Owen, you said about electoral law. But what can parties do about it? Do you think there is any merit in parties having codes of conduct by which their members and candidates have to abide during election campaigns?

Chair: It might be worth each of you thinking about that and doing a paper on it as part of the evidence going forward, because I think it is a very good question. It would be nice if we could pick that up. Maybe we will come back to it at the end.

- Q42 **Ben Obese-Jecty:** What do your parties do to ensure their own members' actions do not cross the line into abuse or intimidation, either against members of other parties or other members of your own? Do you tell your candidates or party members that certain approaches or materials are not permitted when campaigning? Do you take any sanctions against those who flout such rules?

Colin McGrath: Thank you, Ben. Again, it is slightly different being from a smaller party because you just set the tone that is not what a campaign is going to be about. It does not need to be written or codified. When candidates come on board, they would be taken through the process of the election. I do not think I have ever encountered where negative campaigning would necessarily be something that would be utilised. I have been at the other end of negative campaigning, but I have not seen any of our candidates using it. It would just be implicit within the DNA of how we operate elections that this is not what we would do. You publish leaflets, fliers etc that are positive and about what you want to achieve and what you are doing. It is not about taking swipes at others, beyond saying, "A party does this and we would do that, and that is different."

It is there that the atmosphere of the election is to be positive and about yourself. It is not about others and what they are not doing. This is not strictly codified but whenever it comes to a general election, you are talking 18 candidates. It does not take long to get around 18 people and set a tone as to the way in which things are going to happen.

Owen Roberts: We have a candidates' contract that all candidates are required to sign. We are reviewing it for the future, but there are certain expectations set out in that. That covers us if we need to raise any issues with a candidate, which very rarely happens. We also do a campaign guide for each election and there will be a section in there on expected

behaviour and so on. Is that entirely inclusive of all the things we may be talking about today? Possibly not. It does include things on social media, electoral law and—in perhaps a general sense—about tone and negativity and those sorts of things.

We probably could make that more comprehensive. Generally, however, as a smaller party we do tend to deal with these problems as they arise rather than having to have a one-size-fits-all approach. We do cover it through candidate contracts and handbooks.

Timothy Johnston: We have a central director of elections. Authority is vested in him or her and three deputies. We have a centralised system where all templates are provided to all our candidates, and all local material that is subsequently inserted by local teams has to be pre-approved at a final point in the process before printing.

We have what I will not describe as a candidate contract, but it is a candidate undertaking that is underpinned in our rules and our constitution, where there is a range of standards required. Again, as colleagues have said, that can range across everything from how you campaign to your obligations to the party and to broader standards. As I indicated earlier, we have campaign notes that go not just to our candidates but our campaigners. I think we are conscious that, in addition to candidates, people who are campaigning for us as part of their team also reflect on us as an organisation.

To answer your question, we have certainly never had to use it in the eight years that I have been in situ, but we have a fairly robust internal disciplinary process. For example—this applies not in a general election but in a Northern Ireland Assembly election or a local government election—where we have multiple candidates running in the one constituency, it is about how those areas would be divided. We have processes if, at the end, the party centrally, or the director of elections and his team, deems that people have stepped beyond an appropriate line and brought the party into disrepute, so that again will be dealt with.

We are mindful of our reputation, and rightly so. Again, issues like this, which develop during any campaign, become heavily media-focused very quickly, and you have to take action. That very quickly can become not just a process issue but a political issue.

Q43 Zöe Franklin: On the variation across the UK, do you think that the scale and nature of threats experienced by candidates and MPs varies across the UK? In particular, how do differences in policing or legislation affect the experience or response that you have among your candidates and MPs across the UK?

Timothy Johnston: There is inevitably bound to be a difference, so I am not going to set myself up as an expert on GB. My feeling would be that, first, a Member of Parliament in Northern Ireland will be widely known throughout all of Northern Ireland, regardless of what constituency they represent, by the nature of the smaller society here. Whether it is a



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Member for East Antrim or Upper Bann, wherever they go across the whole of Northern Ireland, they will be recognised in a way that is maybe not the case for some of their English or Scottish counterparts, who would go to other parts of the nations and regions and would not be recognised. I think that attracts a little bit more attention.

Secondly, again, there has been the issue of where to go in Northern Ireland. To be honest, there are areas where our candidates would simply never go to canvass, because they would not be fertile areas for receiving votes. Again, that goes back to the constitutional, aspirational and terrorist issues from the past, which is different from England.

For example, I do not think there are situations in Northern Ireland where we have the same issues with knife crime. However, I could cite numerous examples—I will not for the purpose of this exercise—of members and their staff in constituency offices who have had to call the police. They have had difficult constituents in where the line has been crossed and people have felt physically threatened.

There are obviously those who are public representatives in Northern Ireland who still live with an overhanging terrorist threat, which emanates from our situation that you will all be versed in. I think it differs depending on where you are and the issues, and certainly there is a historical hangover here where inevitably we have some members elected who remain under personal threat and have done for many years.

Owen Roberts: I do not think we are in the same situation as Northern Ireland in Wales. There are many commonalities with the situation in England and Scotland, but there are some differences.

I am aware that, in some parts of England, there were very divisive campaigns around issues relating to the middle east, and we did not have that to the same extent in Wales. Some contentious issues, such as immigration, have a slightly different dynamic in Wales—albeit we are starting to see immigration be a contentious issue that raises problems for candidates and campaigners in certain circumstances—but there are a lot of commonalities.

In addition to what is online, we have something that Timothy mentioned. There are ongoing problems, even outside of election times, for elected members and campaigners, often related to conspiracy people, people who have mental health problems and so on. That is an ongoing issue and I think it is as common in Wales as it is in other places. There is a heightened risk around those sorts of things for elected members and candidates.

Colin McGrath: I see it through this lens: in Northern Ireland we live in a contested society—that is before we even enter politics. Whenever you get into politics you are identified, through your political allegiance to the party that you are standing for, in the greater part, as being on one side or the other in that contested society. For some, that means it is fair game to throw abuse at you, to tell you that you are not welcome in an area, to



tell you to stay out of an area, or to try and intimidate you whenever you are canvassing in an area. All that is not necessarily flowing because they dislike you, or dislike your politics, but because you represent a party that represents a different constitutional viewpoint from that area, or from the one that those people have.

I think there is also another lens: if you think of society, there are just some people who get on like that. In Northern Ireland, for them, it is about the other community; if they lived in England, it might be another issue, about whether they want to be part of the EU or not; if they were in France, it might be whether they are socialist enough or not. I think that, within societies, there are people who are prepared to tackle people who they see as being other, and some in a more threatening manner than others.

That reaches back to the point that I made earlier about what we are prepared to accept. Are we prepared to accept that people threaten us and tell us that we are not allowed into an area? We have to say, "No, we are not going to accept that," and if somebody tries to physically assert that threat, it is important that we involve the police and involve the authorities, to make sure that that is kept in check.

On the point that Owen made about people more of the view of conspiracy theorists, I reflect back to during the covid period, when I was out undertaking a bit of campaigning. A member of the public stopped his car, jumped out, squared up to me and wanted to punch me because he disagreed with my views on vaccination. It is about saying, "That is unacceptable behaviour." Just because you are a politician does not mean that you are fair game for any form of threatening behaviour.

Q44 Kirsty Blackman: I agree with Owen—the issues around the middle east were not so prevalent, or so explosive, in Scotland. When you are writing to us afterwards, it would be helpful for you to comment on relationships with social media companies. Both Labour and the Tories are able to contact social media platforms directly, whereas some of the smaller parties who we have heard from are not. Would it be helpful to have some sort of central liaison with social media companies where there are, for example, threats, harassment or illegal behaviour on those platforms? Would better links there, in a central way, be helpful for you?

Owen Roberts: In short, yes. That is a very good question. As a smaller party, we do sometimes have trouble raising these issues with social media companies. It takes a lot of time. It takes a lot of knocking on that door, so some sort of central liaison—I am not quite sure how that would look, but I will reflect on it—is a very good question and a very good suggestion.

Colin McGrath: If I could make this plea: yes, yes and yes again. It is almost impossible for us to speak to large social media companies. In the election that has just passed, we had a female candidate who was subjected to horrendous behaviour through social media. We were powerless to address that because when it came to the police, they were



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very good at listening, but they did not quite know what they could do about it and what the main problem was.

In terms of approaching lawyers for some help on that front, reputational lawyers said, "The more you make of this, and the more you actually spread the video, it means that your reputation is being hit more." The candidate felt belittled, embarrassed and ashamed. That was all during an election campaign, so this is having a direct impact on our democracy. There will be people who heard about that video, and may have changed their voting preference as a result, and we had absolutely no method of addressing that.

One of the recommendations, when I spoke to that candidate in advance of this evidence session, was that if she could only have contacted the company that put the video up, and they could have put that notice on it and helped to remove the footprint of it, she would have felt that something was being done. But the fact that it was not, and that we as a party were powerless to help her and it all happened in the confined space of an election period made it very, very difficult.

My plea is for there to be some form of direct contact in future, be it through the electoral offices, the Electoral Commission or others, so that we can contact them and say, "The brakes need to be put on something out there that is totally wrong."

Timothy Johnston: There is no doubt that large tracts of social media are sewers. We had a similar female candidate who faced a very similar situation to the one you have just heard about. By the time action was taken and we were able to get action taken, the harm was done—emotionally, psychologically and in terms of voters. If we were to provide evidence to your security conference—what our female candidates in particular face is scandalous.

The answer to your question is yes. We have some contacts and we have used them. It is frustrating how long it takes for them to take action after it has been brought to their attention. Whether that is deliberate or inefficient, I do not know. Until Parliament nationally moves, this is a global phenomenon and it is a changing picture that is very hard for the law to keep up with.

In Northern Ireland, we face political opponents who are masters and have significant finance at their disposal to finance anonymous trolling. Frankly, as colleagues have said, the stuff that is posted would not be tolerated in any other walk of life. It puts people off. It does emotional damage to people in public life. Most now simply have others to filter this so they do not see it. I am very blessed that we have a strong press office that is able to be in contact with some of the social media companies, but we are under no illusion about the total lack of effect this has. It is waiting to happen—it is happening every day.

Chair: Thank you for everything you have done and the evidence you have given. Please write in, especially on Sammy's point, which is a very



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good one, to give us any further information. Thank you for joining us and for everything you have offered so far. I am also interested in the way that the police did not react to some of the fake information. It would be helpful if we could have some more details on that. Thank you very much—hopefully you will get past the storm. Thank you everybody.