HOUSE OF COMMONS

Speaker's Conference

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

Wednesday 4 June 2025

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Watch the meeting

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

Questions 171-211

Witnesses

I: Anushka Asthana, Deputy Political Editor at ITV News and chair of the Parliamentary Press Gallery; David Hughes, Political Editor at PA and chair of the Parliamentary Lobby.

II: Elisabeth Costa, Chief of Innovation and Partnerships at Behavioural Insights Team; Helen Fenwick, Professor of Human Rights Law at Durham Law School; Liz Moorse, Chief Executive at Association for Citizenship Teaching; Professor Karthik Ramanna, Professor of Business and Public Policy at Blavatnik School of Government.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Anushka Asthana and David Hughes.

Chair: Good afternoon and welcome. Could you introduce yourselves for the record?

David Hughes: I am David Hughes. I am the political editor at PA and the chairman of the Lobby.

Anushka Asthana: I am Anushka Asthana. I work for ITN—I am moving from ITV to Channel 4 News—and I am the chair of the Press Gallery.

Chair: We will crack straight on, if that is all right. Jess, over to you.

Q171 **Jessica Morden:** Thank you very much for coming. I want to ask whether you believe the level of abuse and intimidation towards both politicians and journalists is making it harder for us all to engage with the public. How do you feel about that and what do you think the press could do to help to turn down the political temperature?

David Hughes: Shall I go first? Anushka probably has more specific examples she can go into, but I would say certainly yes, in the sense that social media has transformed everything. There are now legions of keyboard warriors who are perfectly prepared to spout vile abuse of the kind that, in years gone by, would never have been done in a face-to-face situation. They now have the anonymity of the internet in which to do that.

Journalists are certainly not immune to being targets. I do not have a particularly high public profile, but I get a little bit of abuse online. It is far worse for colleagues in broadcasting, and far worse especially for women. I know that the problem is replicated with MPs, politicians of all sorts and other figures in public life. It is just a sad state of affairs, but it is the world in which we now find ourselves living.

Anushka Asthana: I think it is terrible and it is corrosive to our democracy. I have been here for 20 years, and watching the decline in trust of MPs and journalists has been deeply depressing. We are now down to below 10% of people believing that MPs will tell the truth, and it is not much better for us as journalists. I have suffered a fair amount of abuse, particularly online abuse. I remember writing to my bosses at *The Observer* when I left in 2010—I had faced a lot of racist abuse over an article I had written—saying that if we do not change the way in which we allow people to abuse us in reaction to this, basically, the only people who are ever going to write will be deeply thick-skinned, and I think thin-skinned people should be able to be part of our journalism as well.

What has caused it is complicated. I completely agree with David, obviously, that the social media revolution has massively changed the way people engage with us. You can also link it to things that have cost trust,

for example the Iraq war, the MPs' expenses scandal—that is a really big one—and big, divisive moments like Brexit, where at least half of the country is very upset. Sometimes it is news stories. It is an ethical question that we try to deal with a lot of the time.

The one thing that I would urge you to do—I am sure that we will go into this a lot—is recognise the difference between those of us who work for mainstream organisations and either stick to an IPSO code or are legally bound by Ofcom and those who, for many years, have had a complete wild west on social media. We hope that the Online Safety Act 2023 will bring us to more of a level playing field and perhaps turn down the heat. We will probably go into individual examples of where things have happened and ask what we in the mainstream media could have done differently, but, largely, I would say that we are thinking about these questions all the time. We have daily discussions in our newsroom about how we abide by Ofcom rules, in our case, and IPSO for David.

Q172 **John Slinger:** Do you consider how the cumulative impact of press stories will shape public perceptions of individuals and institutions? One example is that, if broadcast interviews in particular are framed in such a way as to imply or give the impression that someone of any political colour is hiding something, in some way obfuscating, or worse, it paints a particular picture and creates a context of distrust. How can you and how do you ensure that perceptions are balanced and accurate?

Anushka Asthana: We have seen a decline in "gotcha" interviews. I am sure you think that they still exist—they do not always feel fair for someone on your side. For what it is worth, I do not see the value in them. Our viewers have become increasingly frustrated with them over the years; they want us to let you answer the questions. All that said, we want to use the opportunities that we get to hold you to account. We do not get that many opportunities. You get maybe six minutes with the Prime Minister once every six months when you are on a trip. You want to use your six minutes well. There are things that our viewers, who feel that the taxpayer is paying for said Prime Minister, or whoever it might be, want us to ask about and hold people to account on. There is a balance there.

I perhaps agree with you in as much as I do not think that interviews should be framed in a way that tries to turn people into bogeymen or bogeywomen, but it is difficult. It is a two-way street. Over the years that I have been here, I feel that the trust in journalists from politicians has reduced. I have been very frustrated at times that you ask what you think is a straight-up question and do not get an answer. When that happens, you tend to lead into what probably feels to you like more aggressive questioning, but I would describe it as frustrated questioning.

David Hughes: I agree. When we do interviews like that, especially broadcast interviews, we are there to a certain extent as the representatives of our viewers—the public. We want to ask the kinds of questions that we know they would like answers to. When we get answers that seek to avoid the question entirely or answer a different question, or

someone just blurts out the same catchphrases and stock phrases that we have heard time and time again, we get a sense of frustration, and we know that viewers get a sense of frustration. There will be times when we are asking a question to which we know a politician cannot give an answer, but we need to show our viewers that we are asking the question. They are not giving the answers, and we credit the public with enough intelligence to see that we have asked the question, it has not been answered, and they can make up their own minds as to why that is the case.

Q173 **Sir Jeremy Wright:** We have to be conscious of our remit, which is not to stray too far from the levels of abuse and intimidation, which nobody will argue are appropriate, however evasive the politician may have been in an interview. You have mentioned social media, and one of the consequences of political exchanges being on social media is that they are short-form debates. You are expressing yourself in very short statements, and quite often attempting to attract attention by how outrageous those statements can be in the short number of words or syllables you have.

Do you miss the long-form broadcast political interview, and do you think there is any prospect of getting it back? If there is, would that help to turn the temperature down? It might mean that politicians who genuinely do hide behind soundbites, because they have not thought through their argument, will find it difficult to hide—better for you—but it might also mean that politicians have the opportunity to express more clearly why they are thinking what they are thinking, and give the public a clearer understanding of what their perspective really is. Is there any prospect of getting that back? Would you want it back?

Anushka Asthana: I deeply want it back, and I think there is a prospect of it coming back, because there is a hunger for long-form interviews. It is where everyone is having the most success—long-form YouTube and podcast interviews. Every single broadcaster I have worked for—and I have also worked for a number of newspapers—is trying to get into this space and find the next brilliant thing that will do that. I agree with you that the advantage of it is that it allows people to say what they think. Some of it is tipping into culture wars, where the people come in and they put their own recorder down, and then they put that out in full, but they are allowed to do that. I think that is not unreasonable, even if we might need to edit things for a TV audience.

I agree with you about social media. It is so sad that we got to the stage that we did. I would not write about race on social media, so I censor myself, because I cannot be bothered with having the rows I would have. One year, I was five or six days into a social media storm because of something I had said on TV, and it was Christmas day, and I was crying about the fact that I was still getting all this incoming. It is a crying shame, and we are very grateful to politicians who—all of you—continue through that. I went to see Dawn Butler for a TV piece not that long ago. The levels of security she has to have now, a lot of it because of social media abuse, is an absolute disgrace to democracy. I said to her, "Why would you want to be an MP?" because that is how it made me feel. I have

to say that she hesitated when she said whether she would advise a young girl to be an MP now, but you all do it, and so we are very grateful for that.

I am sure we will get more into this, but we think very hard about the way that we do things, and we feel quite strongly that social media has added a toxicity that has made things very difficult. Often, you will pick out a story where we have said something that has revealed something about what is happening in Parliament, but usually, the abuse comes via social media. Although, as organisations, we largely welcome the Online Safety Act and hope it can have some impact, I do not think it deals strongly enough with the specifics that you are looking at in the Speaker's Conference.

David Hughes: On the issue of long-form interviews, it does take two to tango. As journalists, all of us would love the idea of sitting down with the Prime Minister for an hour and properly going into the details of very complicated world events and policy events, but it just does not happen. It is very rare that you get broadcast interviews that last more than five or 10 minutes.

Anushka Asthana: And they are usually poking you to stop you.

David Hughes: Well, yes. Whether the return of Walden-esque hour-long programmes would be the panacea to all this I very much doubt, because if it gets broadcast, then people with an agenda would still clip up the bit that suits their agenda and put that on social media. That would still happen. It would not eradicate it, but in terms of a proper deep dive into political philosophy, political ideas and policy issues, long-form interviews are definitely better than short-form interviews—less frustrating for us as journalists and probably better for the politicians. They can expand on answers and not feel that they need to give those soundbites, but whether there is appetite for that to happen I do not know. I have certainly not detected much of an appetite among senior Government Ministers of either colour to want to sit down regularly for lengthy broadcast interviews.

Anushka Asthana: No, although I think some of them are aware of the power of some of the podcasts. It is worth saying that I did a documentary with the Prime Minister last year, so I listened to everything he had done. He had done this long-form interview with something called "High Performance"—a football podcast, obviously. He had done two hours, and it was the most insightful thing I had ever heard from Keir Starmer. Unfortunately, he would give me much less time, although more than your average.

Q174 **Sammy Wilson:** We are going down this route because we are looking at how we avoid people abusing politicians and at how we replace social media. Is there an appetite among the public for that kind of long interview, especially among the people who are likely to tend towards giving abuse to politicians? Is it an answer for the people we are trying to deal with and target, and whose attitudes we are trying to change?

David Hughes: On the second point, possibly not, because people who engage in abuse online generally act in bad faith. They will generally take something that is said and interpret it in a way that suits their agenda and worldview. So, no, it is not necessarily a response to that.

Anushka Asthana: I think it could to some degree reduce the animosity—distrust may be a better word—between either side. In that situation, I think that politicians being more open could lend itself to people, even on social media, being nicer to them, but I do not think that longer interviews, on their own, will solve the security risk facing MPs.

Q175 **Rebecca Paul:** It is chicken and egg, isn't it? I am a new MP, and I used to get frustrated by seeing politicians not really answer the questions. I thought, "I'm going to go in and be different; I am going to answer the question." But what I now realise is that, because of the increasing abuse, that is how a lot of politicians survive: the more they say, the more chance there is for it to be misinterpreted and used against them. It comes to benefit them to be short, sharp and concise, and not to elaborate or give an opportunity for something to be turned around on them. I think you are right that it is perpetuating this behaviour, but we need to be able to be more open. People need to be able to recognise that there is nuance and context to what is said, and that a soundbite may not reflect what someone actually meant. Sorry, Chair, that was not a question.

Chair: Very open thoughts.

David Hughes: I agree, and I did not answer Sammy's first question, which was whether there is an audience for it. There is, but because of the constraints of broadcasting and things like that, it is often podcasts or dedicated YouTube things that might then be edited down into a TV or radio programme. But the technology exists whereby you can have both.

Anushka Asthana: Also, younger people are, sadly, not watching the bulletins as much as they used to, and they are devouring long-form podcasts. I used to present a long-form podcast for *The Guardian*, "Today in Focus", and I realised that the issue is nothing to do with younger people turning off politics; they just want their media in a different way. They do not trust us in any way like their parents did, so they are more trusting of something that is long form.

Q176 **Zöe Franklin:** One of my questions, which is linked to that, is whether it is reaching the people who need to be reached in order to change the tone of the conversation. There might be the audience for long-form media, but is it the people who need to be hearing the broader conversation, rather than the soundbites that are potentially driving the toxic environment?

Anushka Asthana: You may disagree, but I do not think it is the soundbites on mainstream media that are causing this, although they might be part of the chain. Let me put it this way. You have a story—let's say it is MPs' expenses. We report on it, and we have long and detailed discussions about how we are going to report on it and why. I am sure that some of you will disagree with the way that that was reported on, and feel that all MPs were treated in the same way. But in the mainstream

media, which was largely leading it at the time, we would have thought long and hard. We are reporting on things that are in the public interest to our viewers and readers, and we always consider that public interest on every single story that we do.

That story goes out there, and that opens the floodgates to people abusing you. Is that our responsibility, because we reported on it, or is it perhaps the responsibility of the certain, small group of MPs who abuse those rules?

I was saying just before we came in here, ITV News, where I was at the time, published the video of Allegra Stratton and the partygate suggestions. They had not published that before. It obviously opened up certain people to abuse. It had not hit a public interest threshold beforehand. The reason it was published was because Downing Street denied that it was true. What I am trying to say is that we try to act responsibly and there are things that happen—scandals that take place—that may lead to abuse. We are reporting on them, but we are thinking hard about how we do that. I do not think it is our responsibility how social media then reacts to them, although I hear you, agree with you and feel the abuse is terrible and that we all need to try to deal with it.

David Hughes: On that, I do not think we should shy away from reporting on something, say—hard to believe though it might be—an MP has done something wrong. We shouldn't not report on it on the basis that it might trigger a social media backlash. Our responsibility is to inform the public; we cannot police what is said on social media in response to any of our reporting. Whether the social media firms could and should do more is another issue entirely—I know that you will be looking intently at that. But I do not think the prospect of a social media backlash should have a chilling effect on public interest journalism.

Q177 **Rebecca Paul:** When you are working on a story, I do not think any of us would disagree that when there is a scandal and someone has not complied with the rules, you should absolutely hold to them account—but it is not always just that, is it? Sometimes you are reporting a story where no one has done anything wrong and there is no scandal, but it is a contentious issue, and you reporting it potentially could lead to that person suffering abuse. That could be on Israel-Gaza, trans rights or all the various topics we know people feel strongly about.

When you are considering how to report a story, I appreciate that you will be thinking, "We want as many people as possible to read and see it", and that quite often means pushing the headline, and the boundary. How do you balance that against thinking, "Okay, this person hasn't done anything wrong, but they have a view that some people will not like, and it could lead to abuse"? How do you balance getting that right and considering the abuse it could lead to for the individual?

Anushka Asthana: We cannot speak for specific organisations; I have worked at a lot of organisations, but there are some that I will not have worked at and may do things very differently. On both issues that you

mentioned, when I was doing that podcast at *The Guardian*, I got asked to do a two-part series on trans rights and something on antisemitism in the Labour party, which was a very toxic issue at the time. In terms of the way you try to come at it—speaking to the earlier point from Sammy—we did long form on it and it took so much of the toxicity out of it. I had sleepless nights for a year doing that trans rights thing because I was so worried about getting abuse from all sides. In the end, we did not, because we had first done in it in long form, tried to understand it and been really open about it—I had been open about the fact that I did not really know, and I was on a journey. I think there are ways to pull some of the heat out of things like that.

I do not think our approach to it is necessarily, "How do we stop people being abused?"; it is, "How do we report on this fairly and, in doing so, how do we provide balance?" The problem we have to some extent is that views are so polarised right now that it is so hard to bring people together. Take trans rights: both sides think that in no circumstances is the other side right about anything, so there is no way I could have produced a piece on that where both sides would have been happy.

One thing we think about all the time is fairness. How are we being fair to a contributor? How, if a contributor is being accused of something, do we make sure that they have a right of reply? Again—we were talking about this—IPSO does not require you to go for a right of reply, but it would be a very exceptional circumstance where you would not do so. In my 20 years, I can remember almost no occasion where I have not gone for a right of reply. I think fairness is the thing that I come at. How do we present this in a way that might be controversial for the individuals involved, but has at least been fairly represented?

David Hughes: For the written press, unlike for broadcasters, there is no requirement to be impartial. The written press can take a view; a publication can have a stance on Israel-Palestine or Gaza, trans rights or something like that, and is not required to put the other point of view. But that is an element of freedom of speech and freedom of expression. We have a free press in this country. Anything that sought to constrain that right would be a very slippery slope down which to go. However, having said that, those of us who are under the IPSO umbrella are bound to be accurate in what we write. If someone has expressed a view on a contentious issue—again, there is nothing wrong with that, and people should have the right to express their views on contentious issues, MPs especially—as long as it is being reported in an accurate way, I do not think we should be constrained in any way, shape or form from reporting that.

Q178 **Mark Tami:** We quite often hear from print journalists about how terrible the abuse MPs get is, but I guarantee we will open a paper tomorrow and there will be a headline that will lead to a lot of abuse, but that does not fully reflect the whole story. The real fact may not even be in the story; it might be buried on the following page or the page after that. I have had conversations with journalists sometimes who say, "Oh, it is terrible. It

was awful, the amount of racial abuse that person got.", and I think, "You wrote the piece." The headline is a grabbing headline. I understand why you do that, because it gets people to read it, but this is about the consequences of it. People do not read to page whatever to get the context of the story, if indeed the context is there. Do you think there is a responsibility to be a bit better on things like that?

David Hughes: The headline needs to be read in conjunction with the story as a whole, for starters. Again, accuracy is one of the cornerstones of the press. We cannot publish things that are not accurate and, if we do, there are consequences. We might have to issue a correction or an apology. If something is accurate, regardless of whether you agree with it or of whether you think it takes a particularly one-sided view of something, if it is an accurate reflection of something that has happened or something that has been said, then I am afraid that that is the price of living in a country with a free press.

Q179 **Mark Tami:** But sometimes something is quoted as fact but, when you read the story, it is the view of a think tank or something like that, not a fact.

Anushka Asthana: Do you have any examples?

Mark Tami: I do have some examples, yes, but all I am saying is that if you do not read the story fully, and just read the headline, you can get the view that whether something may or may not happen is an established fact rather than the view of a think-tank.

David Hughes: Things that are not facts should not be presented as facts; that is just basic. If something is a claim, we should indicate who has made the claim and the reasons behind it. Fundamentally, there will be things written with which you do not agree, but that does not mean they shouldn't be written.

Q180 **Sir Jeremy Wright:** The specific question, I think, is about the connection between the headline and the content of the piece. I suppose the question might be whether you consider that the headline ought to reflect the proper balance of the piece that is underneath it. Or is the headline written with different rules entirely, or no rules at all? Is there an expectation that you would write a headline that is properly reflective of the balance of the piece?

David Hughes: It certainly should, but the headline needs to be read in conjunction with the piece as a whole. The headline does not stand by itself. It needs to be read in conjunction with the story. Sometimes I read headlines and think, "That does not really stack up." It is an issue, but it is for individual publications to decide how they write their headlines; the headlines are every bit as subject to accuracy claims as everything else, but they should be read in conjunction with the rest of the story.

Q181 **Chair:** Let me follow that up, because it is quite interesting. The problem with that is that people will look at the headline and make a decision based on the headline. The hate comes through and the headline actually

does not match the story—and the bit that says that that was not the case is buried somewhere. What do we do about that? We cannot make them read the rest of the story.

David Hughes: No, but within IPSO, the accuracy clause would cover that. If it is not an accurate story as a whole, the publication would be liable to a complaint to IPSO on that basis.

Anushka Asthana: I know you are not going to give me exact examples, but if you have them, I think it would be—

Q182 **Chair:** I have got a few, don't worry.

Anushka Asthana: If you want to share them, I can talk through what we think. But more broadly, I recognise the frustration where a headline might be this long. Let's be honest: newspapers are obviously also trying to appeal to readers and get people to read the story. How often are we having arguments with the people who are writing headlines to try and get them perfect. When you are trying to get it in three or four words—whatever it might be—it is difficult.

Q183 **Mark Tami:** Quite often, you see a story about somebody, and it will be having a go at them or whatever, and at the bottom it will say, "No rules have been broken", or something like that. If you add a headline that said, using an extreme example, "MP has not broken any rules by doing this", it would not be a story, would it?

Anushka Asthana: No but the story does not have to be that the MP has broken the rules. As long as they are saying what the MP—

Q184 **Mark Tami:** Yes, but in reality it is, isn't it? It implies that.

Anushka Asthana: I think we have actually come a long way in terms of the rules covering headlines, as well as the rest of the story. I recognise the frustration, and if you show me them I will have a look at them, but to some extent if someone can do something that is ethically wrong to our viewers, but it does not break the rules, the fact that it is ethically wrong to our viewers would still make it a story even though it does not break the actual rules. Under that guise, we would not have reported half of the partygate scandal.

Q185 **Mark Tami:** I do not think it is so much of a problem with broadcasting; it is a lot more of a problem with the written press.

Anushka Asthana: I can cover both to some extent. One thing you said that I want to touch on is that there has been a tendency over the years for individual MPs to become hate figures. This may not be my area of expertise, but I think that is really corrosive, and both political parties and journalists bear some responsibility for it.

I was in shock in, I think, the 2015 election, when I saw senior figures in political parties trying, almost pantomime-like, to get a crowd worked up about a certain individual MP and how awful they were. That then feeds itself, and the media goes after that individual. I am not going to name

names, but I am sure we all know who some of these people are, and the levels of abuse they get is like nothing we have ever seen.

I have written once or twice about some of these individuals, and I have been shocked. On one occasion, I got 1,500 racist tweets aimed at me because I had revealed something about an individual in Parliament—they probably got ten times that.

David Hughes: On the headlines issue, clause 1.1 of the IPSO code is, "The Press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information or images, including headlines not supported by the text."

Q186 **Mark Tami:** Yes, but we could argue about how effective or otherwise the IPSO code is.

Anushka Asthana: Maybe that is the next question.

Chair: That is absolutely the bigger question.

Q187 **Leigh Ingham:** On your point about people choosing to go into politics, for me there was a really telling moment. I come from a very working-class background, and my mum worked in a factory. When I said I was studying to be an MP, she said, "Please don't". It was really sad for me that someone like my mum, who had never thought of this for me, was actually saying, "I'd rather you didn't".

She is very proud of me, but I think it was a really telling moment—I think it is probably a story that a lot of us share, which is quite saddening. On that point, what is the public interest in aggressively confronting MPs and candidates outside their homes or questioning their family members?

Anushka Asthana: If you have different examples in terms of going to people's homes, please let me know. I have tried to speak to colleagues about this over the last two days—I am not in the decision-making process on this, but I have spoken to them about how that decision is made. They tell me that the bar for us to go to someone's home is extremely high, and that largely it would involve a Cabinet Minister at a point, for example, in which they have resigned or been sacked, or somebody where there are very serious allegations against them.

This has come a long way. I remember being in massive packs outside people's homes in the noughties—I was not reporting on politics all the time then—and I can totally see that what was happening at the time was wrong. In a situation where we have a story that we believe is at the bar, we will try to get a response from said individual. If a response is not forthcoming, we will then all, as a broadcast group, the entire pool, discuss whether we might send to somebody's home. We will try to pool it so that there are not multiple cameras outside their home. We will not go up and knock on people's doors. We will not film their children. When it comes to us making the edit on something like that, I would never have anything that would identify where that home is.

The use of it is where we believe there is a very strong public interest in getting a response from the individual. And if it is an MP below Cabinet level, we would say that the allegation against them needs to be quite high. If you have experienced otherwise, maybe that is not for here, but maybe it is something that we need to feed back more generally.

That is the process that we go through. If said Cabinet Minister walks past and does not answer the question, we will probably go home for the day, but if we still believe that whatever is happening has a public interest aspect to it, we will go back the next day. As for where we will doorstep in a more full-on way, I will admit that if I am at a conference, like a COP conference, I might chase a world leader down the corridor and try to get a microphone in their face, but that is in a public setting and to talk about a story that we are talking about.

As for family members, they are not fair game. They are not politicians; they are not in the public eye. If somebody is approaching family members, they are breaking the Ofcom code. We are obviously allowed, in certain situations, to ask people whether they are willing to do interviews.

The one thing I would like to say on that is that I don't think your average member of the public understands either the Ofcom or the IPSO code. You can have a situation in which journalists contact them, and they feel really bad about it and do not know what to do. In that situation, particularly if it involves, for example, a police officer—I think it is also important for MPs to let their families know this; I don't know what process you have for it—IPSO will immediately put a notice out to all newsrooms to ask us to desist, and they tend to be very effective.

David Hughes: Do you have a specific example? I am surprised if family members are being questioned.

Q188 **Mark Tami:** I can give you a specific example. Recently, where someone's home was besieged and their young son left the house, someone pretended to be a friend of the MP and so they were helping that person. They had "lost" the MP's mobile number, and the son unwittingly gave them the mobile number. That person worked for a national newspaper. The defence often given by the national newspapers is, "Oh, it's just this local person we have recruited. They don't work directly for us. Oh, it's terrible, yeah. We wouldn't descend to that level." But they do.

David Hughes: The IPSO code is pretty clear on things like that.

Q189 **Mark Tami:** But that is not the point, is it? With the greatest of respect, it is all very well quoting the IPSO code. You should not be doing it.

Anushka Asthana: No, but did you go to IPSO about that case?

Q190 **Mark Tami:** I don't know, because I was not the person affected. But I think just hiding behind what a lot of people see as a very ineffective and powerless body is not acceptable. That would be my view.

David Hughes: But it sets standards that responsible journalists and newsrooms should follow. If people are not following those rules—

Anushka Asthana: They should be hauled up, I think, in that situation. Again, can I just stress it has changed a lot? I remember being on a doorstep—who was the farmer who shot the boy in the back? It must have been 20 years ago or so—

David Hughes: Tony Martin.

Anushka Asthana: Tony Martin. One neighbour told me, "I got out of my shower and there was a journalist sitting on the sofa waiting to talk to me. They had scaled the house to get in." I hear you and I think that that is a conversation that needs to be taken back. You are right: we cannot just hide behind the IPSO code. It has to have teeth. Yours is a shocking example, but I have not heard stuff like that as much for years.

Chair: That was in the last three months.

Q191 **Mr Betts:** I cannot say I have had a journalist come into the shower to interview me, but back in the noughties, my neighbour found one hiding behind the garden hedge waiting to take photographs. Of course, the reputable national newspapers said, "That wasn't us; it was somebody we had employed freelance."

Mark Tami: That is always the defence.

Mr Betts: You were just talking about standards and following them. You said that you would not do that unless there was a serious allegation against an MP or it was in the public interest. But who decides that?

Anushka Asthana: We will take that decision, and we will do it by talking between ourselves, with our lawyers and with other broadcasters, where it is relevant. Whenever it involves going to someone's house, it would be with other broadcasters. We believe that we are trusted journalists who can make a decision. If it is not in the public interest, the Ofcom code has teeth and will absolutely come back to bite you. We will get in a lot of trouble for it.

Q192 **Mr Betts:** What does "a lot of trouble" mean?

Anushka Asthana: It depends what the situation is. I have never broken the Ofcom code because I think I am a trusted journalist who does not have to. We can face fines or have to take material down. We can apologise. One of the things that we would do immediately if we made a mistake is apologise as quickly as we can on air. I am speaking from a broadcaster's point of view, but what I can tell you from what I see inside broadcast organisations is that we take those things very seriously. There are times where you will disagree on the fairness of it. I cannot tell you the number of MPs who tell me that they thought the MPs' expenses coverage was unfair. Journalists perhaps disagreed on that one. There are loads of stories where that might happen, but we have to convince our lawyers that these things are in the public interest.

Q193 **Mr Betts:** That is the broadcast media. On the written media, we talked about responsible journalism, but do you accept that there is a difference in the way that different newspapers behave? What some newspapers

think is irresponsible, others will accept as responsible and carry on and do it. In the end, the sanction might be that you have to publish an apology. Page 14, bottom of the page—"Oh, there's a little apology there." That does not begin to undo the damage done by the main story.

David Hughes: Again, like Ofcom, IPSO has a public interest test and it is not a "get out of jail free" card. There are strict rules about what counts as being in the public interest. If you break the code, the sanctions from IPSO can be quite serious. You can have to do a front-page apology or make reparations. If you have specific examples of where the regulator has not been effective, that is a different matter, but what you have to understand is that, as journalists, we have an interest in doing a story, but we also have a responsibility to our employers and to ourselves to do it in the correct way, which unfortunately is not something that happens online.

Anushka Asthana: A lot of the time, when there is a lot of abuse, it is over policy areas. Take the winter fuel allowance or welfare changes: are we responsible for the abuse for reporting on those things and speaking to people all over the country who want to talk about the impact of those things, or are the policymakers responsible for making the decisions in the first place? Each of these things is usually pretty complicated.

We are not going to not write or speak about issues because they are controversial and unfortunate. Those are the things that have really affected trust—right back to Iraq, although Iraq was not followed by a social media storm. The difference between Iraq and what we see now shows that the social media storm has been a massive a game changer. We might disagree on this, but I think those things have affected trust more than a misleading headline here or there. These are massive societal changes that have made people distrust politicians and journalists, and I would defend our right to cover them.

Q194 **Sir Jeremy Wright:** Because we are focused on visiting of MPs' home addresses at this point, I will ask this. You have been very clear that, in your view, there is a public interest justification only in the most exceptional circumstances. There is obviously a good basis for that because, as you fully appreciate, the effect on members of an MP's family, who are almost certainly wholly innocent in whatever the MP may be alleged to have done, is considerable. In the age of social media and increasing technology, the vulnerability of those premises, if you put it on film, is greater than it ever was. The justification that you have given us in those exceptional circumstances is to obtain a response from a Member of Parliament accused of wrongdoing that you have not succeeded in getting in any other way. How successful is that tactic? How often do you get a response from a Member of Parliament as a result of visiting their home address?

Anushka Asthana: If they offer to do a clip, we would not visit their home address. If they said they are happy to come and do a clip, we would find a location to do that, we would do it and we would not go to their home address.

Q195 **Sir Jeremy Wright:** That was not quite the question I asked. If the justification for going is to get a response you cannot get any other way, surely, we have to consider how often that tactic ever succeeds in order to consider whether it is justifiable?

Anushka Asthana: I do not have the statistics to hand, but we often get people coming out and saying something outside their house. If they come out and do not say anything, we would at least withdraw for the day. I should say that we do not want to be going and standing outside people's houses in most situations. It is not good for us. I do not want to have to blur everything in the background of my TV piece. I would rather do a clip with the individual in Westminster. We would almost always accept a pool clip in that case. We are not even asking people to do multiple clips; we are asking you to do one clip with one broadcaster. I think, increasingly, lots of senior politicians do understand that and will do that to try to make—

Q196 **Sir Jeremy Wright:** Yes, but they are doing it because they have decided that the consequences of not doing it to them and their family is too serious not to give in, are they not?

Anushka Asthana: But there are some things that are—a Cabinet Minister is a very senior person in the public eye, and there are some occasions on which they are refusing to answer a question on something, and we believe it is right in that situation—

Q197 **Sir Jeremy Wright:** I think that is a fair point, but you can always write that the Cabinet Minister has refused to respond. Does that not do enough?

David Hughes: I would say there is value, in that case, of demonstrating to an audience that we have tried. If we are at their house and they walk by and ignore our questions, then you have them getting in the car and driving off or whatever it is. We can say that we have tried and have even gone to the extent of going to their house to see if they will speak to us, they have not, and provide proof that they have not. Rather than just saying to a viewer, "They would not comment," we can say, "Here is them refusing to comment."

Anushka Asthana: I stress again that that would not happen to most MPs. That bar has gone up and up. When I did the Dawn Butler stuff, I was invited to Tobias Ellwood's house to do an interview with him about what it was like when that protest happened outside his house. It is extremely scary, and we would never want to be in a situation where anyone's home is being identified in any way. The story you just gave, Mark, of the kid—I think that is a disgrace and it should not have happened. If we can talk about ways to stop things like that happening, then I think we should be open to it. The one thing I would say is that we represent the lobby, but these decisions are made by individual organisations. We do not represent them, but I am on the board of the Society of Editors, and I will certainly feed back some of the stuff you have been saying the next time we meet.

Chair: That is great. Thank you both for taking time out today, because it really has been appreciated. If you feel there is something that we have not covered or something you would like to add, please send that in, because it would be very helpful.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Elisabeth Costa, Professor Helen Fenwick, Liz Moorse and Professor Karthik Ramanna.

Q198 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome. Could you please introduce yourselves for the record? Then we will start our first questions.

Professor Helen Fenwick: I am Helen Fenwick. I am a professor of law at the University of Durham.

Professor Karthik Ramanna: I am Professor Karthik Ramanna. I am a professor of business and public policy at the University of Oxford's Blavatnik School of Government.

Elisabeth Costa: I am Elisabeth Costa. I am the chief of innovation and partnerships at the Behavioural Insights Team and a senior visiting fellow at the London School of Economics.

Liz Moorse: I am Liz Moorse. I am the chief executive of the Association for Citizenship Teaching, and a director of the Council for Subject Associations.

Q199 **Sir Jeremy Wright:** It seems to us that people increasingly find it acceptable to abuse public figures. If it seems that way to you too, why do you think that is?

Elisabeth Costa: I agree with you on that. It is becoming the social norm, and more acceptable—or at least there is the perception that it is more acceptable. There is a range of psychological and social factors, but for the Committee I thought I might highlight some of the behavioural factors that I think are driving this, because I am coming from a behavioural science perspective. There are three that I think are quite interesting and link to potential actions that the Committee could take. The first is hot state decision making, the second is online disinhibition and the third is dynamic and changing social norms. I will go through those in turn.

Hot state decision making is a term used in behavioural science and psychology where we are making decisions in a state where we have really strong and visceral emotions—whether those are anger, frustration or even hunger sometimes—compared with being in a cold, calm and rational state. A lot of the academic research done on abuse generally and offensive behaviour and toxicity online—particularly the research on what people regret posting on online platforms—suggests that people post or say these things when they are in these hot states of decision making. Perhaps later in the sitting I could come to some of what the behavioural

science would say about how to break those hot states and what do about it.

On online disinhibition, a lot of the abuse of public figures, as I understand it, is happening on online platforms and online spaces. We tend to have a stronger sense of anonymity online, and therefore we are much more disinhibited in the way that we behave, what we say and how we act. We also tend to feel less accountable for our actions online and to feel less human empathy—we do not tend to feel like the people we are speaking to in those online spaces are real people with emotions, feelings and families. That is supported by some of the research specifically about abuse of MPs and public figures.

In particular, there was a survey done by the University of York of about 2,000 British adults about what they felt was acceptable and not acceptable in terms of behaviour towards elected officials. In that survey, only about a third of people felt that it was never acceptable to send an abusive or offensive email to an MP, whereas more than 60% of people said that it was never acceptable behaviour for any other, in-person interaction—those that involved being at an MP's office or home, for instance. You can see that there is this real difference between our perception of what is acceptable online versus offline. Again, I am happy to talk later in the session about some of the solutions and interventions that have been tested in online spaces.

Finally, thinking about what that means for the shifts in social norms, my personal sense is that that shift in the online space is really spilling over to the sense of what is acceptable more generally and our sense of what is normative behaviour. We are all social creatures. We want to be doing the things that people like us are doing; and more and more, where we are seeing that kind of behaviour and language and action online, we think actually that is more acceptable in other spaces of our lives. I would say, though, that social norms are dynamic; they can be changed and shifted. Again, perhaps later in the session, we can pick up on how we turn that around into a more positive social norm and how we build norms of civility as well.

Liz Moorse: These are really interesting times, and it was very interesting to hear those behavioural insights. I am going to approach the question slightly differently, because I am here really from an education perspective. We have to look at what has been going on in society and what has been going on in democratic societies, as well as the influences that we are all very aware of in this digitised age and how those are impacting us individually as communities and groups in society and in national and public spaces.

Some of those are affected by social media for sure. With the use of smartphones and mobile phones, the way we interact with people has changed. Our levels of trust seem to have been eroded, particularly in politicians, journalists and some of the other trusted individuals that used to be higher up in public perceptions of trust. We see that among young people and children as well.

It is interesting to reflect on the circumstances when citizenship education first started to be discussed. It was partly to do with a worry about the political apathy that had been developing in the population as a whole, but particularly in younger people. It was also partly in response to very public concerns about some serious violent attacks and murders, including the murder of Stephen Lawrence; the murder of Philip Lawrence, a headteacher in west London; and a number of other cases. Public concern was building about morality, the values of young people and what was going on with them: did they understand the kind of society that we have in this country that is based on democratic values, human rights and the rule of law? Was that there, and did that need to be brought in a stronger sense into our national education system?

We are now in a different age. Things have certainly moved on, and we are all very conscious of that, but the reasons for doing something through education are still very present. Hopefully, we can talk about that a little bit later on.

Q200 **Sir Jeremy Wright:** I am sure we will. Professor Fenwick, you will obviously have views on that question. In many cases, the distinction between abuse on the one hand and legitimate political criticism on the other is very difficult to make. Do you have any observations on how we reach a decision about where that line should be drawn and how we make sure that, if we are to take action to limit abuse, we are not at the same time limiting legitimate political criticism and commentary?

Professor Helen Fenwick: To add to what has already been said about social media, people are more habituated to toxic content on social media than they were, say, six years ago.

On the question of how we draw the line, certain types of speech are seen as much less valuable than others, such as threatening and abusive types of language—the way that something is expressed, not in a considered fashion, but with the accompaniment of threats or abuse. The type of speech and the form that it appears in has an impact on whether we consider the speech to be valuable or not.

While trying to address the issue of online abuse of MPs, clearly there will be robust political debate on various issues, and a line has to be drawn between robust political debate, which is acceptable, and when something becomes abusive. One of the main distinctions can be whether something is expressed in terms that move beyond the general parameters of debate. Criminal law recognises that by setting out various offences.

Criminal law already engages in line drawing, not necessarily specifically in relation to MPs, but in relation to debate, including political debate. Criminal law already contains offences related to causing distress, harassment, threats, abuse, and so on. When such terminology is used we are fairly able to say that the line has been crossed from a general and robust debate on a range of issues, which is protected freedom of speech. Then certain types of expression can be penalised. That has been accepted for some time. The Public Order Act 1986 is one example that means that

certain forms of speech can be penalised, because they give rise to distress, alarm and so on—they sometimes go far beyond that. Broadly speaking, that is where the line could be drawn. It is partly to do with the manner of the expression.

Q201 **Sir Jeremy Wright:** Thank you. Elisabeth's point—she will correct me if I have misunderstood it—is that where that line is drawn has moved in many people's minds, and it has moved largely because of the nature of social media debate. Do you have any sympathy with that view, and should that be the case? Should we accept that the line has moved or is there a way to push back and say, "No, the line should be where it always was."?

Professor Helen Fenwick: The line has moved in terms of people's perception of what is acceptable, as you have just said. I blame that largely on online interactions. As I mentioned before, people tend to be guided by algorithms to particularly toxic content. More controversial content tends to gain more attractiveness online and therefore it gains a greater audience. There is a case for saying that people are habituated to quite abusive content online in a way that would definitely not have been the case 10 years ago. Being given that kind of habituation, they tend to express themselves online in a way that they would not do in a face-to-face encounter. People's perception of what is acceptable and even of robust debate has changed.

There are a number of things that can be done to push the line back and make people more aware of it. We already have the Online Safety Act in force. Certain types of cyber-bullying or abusive expression online are caught by the Act in various ways. One specific way is that the tech companies are supposed to view such expression as illegal content because it corresponds to a specific criminal offence. We are not talking about prosecutions; we are talking about tech company moderators. Obviously, prosecutions could occur, but that is a separate issue. Since March, tech company moderators should be looking for the kind of content that we are talking about online and they ought to be removing it—the terminology is "swiftly". It could perhaps be a bit more precise, but in any event, that is what they are supposed to be doing.

How far is that happening? Since it has only been in place since March, at the moment it is difficult to say exactly what the response of the tech companies is. Are they, in fact, employing far more moderators with a view to taking down illegal content swiftly? Assuming that they do—I have grave doubts that that is happening in a very effective way—but if one assumes that it may become more prevalent for the tech companies to take down such content, then perhaps the line will be drawn and will gradually move back. At least it is arguable that it might move back.

Another point is that the tech companies could do a lot more, and so could public education campaigns, aside from what the tech companies might do, to educate people on their sites as to which matters could be illegal content. Some people think, "I only tweeted something once. It was pretty strong, but it was only a short tweet. Maybe that doesn't matter." Well,

actually that short tweet is caught, depending on exactly how it is expressed. It can be caught as illegal content if it falls within the parameters of certain criminal offences.

That would be illegal content, and, even for that short tweet, it would not necessarily mean that the poster would be punished—although they could be prosecuted, in theory—but it would mean that the tech company could be subject to sanctions if it did not swiftly remove the tweet or whatever type of online expression we are talking about. We have a chance to apply the Online Safety Act, possibly accompanied by a public online safety campaign, to try to push the line back, so that social media is not seen as an arena where abuse, especially abuse of MPs, can simply occur and, to some extent, become normalised and acceptable.

Q202 **Sir Jeremy Wright:** Thank you very much. Professor Ramanna, can I ask for your thoughts on, first, the acceptability of abuse of public figures, and secondly, the line between what is abuse and what is legitimate political commentary or criticism?

Professor Karthik Ramanna: Sure—I am happy to comment on both issues. I agree with my fellow panellists that social media plays an important role in the transition to what I call the age of outrage. In my scholarship and teaching, I view social media as more a catalytic factor than a causal factor. By that, I mean that if I were able to wave a magic wand and make all the social media in the world disappear, we would still be living in an age of outrage. I do not think we would lose all the outrage that we are experiencing. Social media is taking an underlying latent issue and making it worse, but it is probably worth us spending a moment on some of those underlying latent causes as well.

In my estimation, there are three things that matter. The first is what I call fear of the future. That could be a combination of factors such as technological obviation of jobs and professions as we have known them due to AI, but also increasingly quantum computing, and, in the past, things such as globalisation. It could also be a fear of the future driven by concerns about climate change and shifts in weather patterns, and the mass migration that might provoke. It could also be a fear of the future prompted by concerns about demographic shifts. By the year 2050, half of all people under the age of 18 in the world are expected to be in sub-Saharan Africa. The world will look very different in that period, in the course of just one generation.

The second causal factor beyond fear of the future is what I call a sense of the raw deal. Particularly in richer, western societies, people feel like the institutions of the state have failed them. Narratives around globalisation or immigration are being viewed, rightly or wrongly, as somehow having failed the interests of the people. They feel like the elites are not on their side and that is driving a deep sense of distrust in public institutions.

The third factor is what I call a growing sense of ideologies of othering. Rather than view this as sort of a global humanist project, which has been the dominant enlightenment theme through much of western liberal

democracy, in which we are all in this together, increasingly, we are seeing people hold a cause with their more native tribal identities, viewing the world in us versus them logic—that is, the ideologies of othering.

Those are three structural causes that I think the absence of social media would still lay bare for us to reckon with. Social media is certainly making things worse. Perhaps the most severe issue associated with social media is with people under the age of 25, and perhaps under the age of 16, because those ages are when brain plasticity is highest. Beyond the age of 25, some of your critical thinking skills and so forth have been baked in, so you may be a little less susceptible to some of the influences of social media, particularly the anonymity, contagion and the other forces that our panellists have described.

On the issue of what can be done about it, my work focuses more on how organisations rebuild systems of trust in the context of this outrage, rather than whole systems, but if you look at for instance the UK Parliament as an organisation, then you would consider the UK as a whole system. One thing that leaders in the organisation have to do is model the behaviour that they want seen among people who are part of that organisation. There is genuine cause of disagreement among people in light of the structural factors I have talked about: the fear of the future, the sense of the raw deal, the rising sense of othering. However, what leaders can do most effectively is model behaviour so that people can disagree without being disagreeable. We can spend some more time, if we have the chance, to unpack what that entails in different organisational contexts. That is where I would be comfortable offering further insights.

Q203 **Sammy Wilson:** Two of the witnesses already have mentioned about the need for education and greater public awareness of those who are being abused. That has all been well heard. Given the distrust and cynicism that there is about politicians, how possible is it to build a critical public awareness campaign where people can see the issues that are impacting politicians and the way in which their abuse impacts them and indeed change their behaviour, which many of you have talked about? Ms Moorse, you talked about education, and maybe we could start with you. Do you believe it is possible to build that kind of critical or credible public awareness and education campaign?

Liz Moorse: Absolutely. I will talk about schooling and education predominantly, because that is the kind of work that ACT is involved in. We have to see schools as communities. Citizenship education is taught as a subject within the curriculum, but it goes beyond that; it is about the culture of that community and the way that young people are engaged in decision making in that community and culture. Trust comes through building socialisation skills from a young age, understanding different people who you are interacting with and learning more about the groups and societies that you are part of. That is a fundamental strand within the citizenship education remit. We have to see this in that context.

There is some academic research now that suggests that some of the problems that are being, as a colleague online described, "catalysed" by

social media, could be fixed by physical community rebuilding. A mixture of things need to happen here, but certainly the role of schools, the curriculum and education is critical. Some children do not have the certainty of a good family upbringing; they are living in very difficult circumstances, and schooling can be a place where they feel safe and can discuss different challenging ideas and experiences they are having in their lives and communities. If we do not provide safe spaces to do that in our schools—particularly with this catalysing effect going on—where are they going to have that opportunity? Where are they going to have the opportunity to really understand what being a member of a democratic society means, what the relationships are within that democratic society, and why the people in this building are human beings too, with feelings and perspectives and needs?

Citizenship education brings together teaching about democracy, human rights, identities and communities, and includes quite a strong strand on what we call active citizenship, about having practical experiences of working together with others, learning about different people from different backgrounds, and having real experiences of democratic practices and decision making. If we do not give time to that in our schools and curriculum, we will regret it, because the world is a very complex place at the moment.

For some of our young people, particularly our most vulnerable young people, there is now increasing research on the fact that children and young people with neurodiverse conditions are more inclined to believe conspiracy viewpoints and those extreme perspectives that we are all worried about. If we do not provide spaces and skill up our teachers to teach this area properly, we will regret it, and the likes of Andrew Tate and others will continue to have huge effects as influencers and as builders of subcultures that are really affecting our young people in a very negative way.

Q204 **Sammy Wilson:** I can see how education at school can deal with this issue in the long run. We have an immediate problem with people who are not influenced in school because they have left school and everything else, but who are engaging in this abuse. Professor Fenwick, you said that we need an education programme to reach out to those engaging in abuse. How would you see that being driven, especially against the background that most of the people you are trying to address do not even trust politicians or the institutions they belong to, and they will presumably be driving this public education programme?

Professor Helen Fenwick: Are we talking about what the content of a public education programme might be or—

Q205 **Sammy Wilson:** I suppose it is about the content, but it is also about, against the cynicism, opposition and purviews that those who you are seeking to address have, what kind of credible programme you would see being devised to reach those people and address that issue.

Professor Helen Fenwick: In terms of the public education programme, as opposed to a school-based one, I suppose a school-based one might be easier to organise. In terms of content, what has not been mentioned yet, in terms of participation in a democracy, is civics lessons in schools and so on and trying to enhance provision that is already occurring. One aspect would be talking about things such as false information online—not just online, but particularly online—to try to improve children's awareness of when they might be encountering false information.

There is a lot of evidence that false information was promulgated in the UK general election and in the US general election. That has given rise to research that shows that with particular generations—under-18s are particularly susceptible— there is a lack of trust in electoral outcomes, perhaps in MPs generally, and in the democratic process. That is because people are not sure whether they can believe what a traditional broadcaster or the press say when they are giving information about the democratic process, compared to information that they come across online. Trying to raise awareness of the promulgation of false information online particularly among children under 18, but also in general, is a particular concern at the moment.

In terms of how a public education campaign could be rolled out, there have been public education campaigns in the past that could presumably provide some kind of model. It would probably be run via broadcasting, although they could be online as well. There is no reason why the social media companies cannot show more responsibility in terms of the educational aspect of online content. There is an awful lot of online content that is just entertainment-based, and then some of it is quite toxic in all sorts of ways. There is no reason why social media companies could not be placed under an obligation, probably by Ofcom, to include more public-service type material on their platforms, including material of the type that we are talking about—in other words, the material of anti-democratic tendency that is already available on social media platforms, including false information.

Going back to what we were saying before, the promulgation of false information, and therefore the creation of a lack of trust in politics in general, is one more factor in relation to the online abuse of MPs. The various outlets available—broadcasting is obviously one and social media is another—could carry the content that we are talking about: an education campaign aimed at different age groups, because different age groups may be susceptible to different types of content.

Models used in the past for campaigns to raise awareness about health issues—for example, against smoking—could be utilised. The models promulgated in the past could be utilised for a public education campaign on the lines that we are talking about. That would be valuable to try to push back against the whole idea that abusive content—encountering abusive content and adding to abusive content online—is in some way acceptable, especially in relation to undermining the political process. Obviously, the online abuse of MPs could lead to an undermining of the

political process and therefore an undermining of democracy, for the obvious reason that MPs might feel intimidated when they vote or speak in a certain way. There is evidence that MPs have felt intimidated on particularly controversial subjects.

There are a number of strands that such a public education campaign could include, and similar material could also be promulgated in schools as part of, say, civic lessons. That would be very valuable.

Professor Karthik Ramanna: I suggest that schools focus on—this is beyond addressing some of the causes of outrage we are discussing today—critical analytical thinking. Schools perhaps do not spend enough time on building skills for critical analytical thinking, and modes of instruction are still very much geared towards learning bodies of knowledge rather than being able to critically evaluate them. The reform of the curriculum more generally to build those kinds of skills, which have traditionally been called liberal arts skills, is generally the right direction, including to address the problem of polarisation.

More generally, as we think about the role of Parliament, the electoral process or MPs, I have found in my own work that once you are experienced as part of the problem, it is very hard for you to suddenly pivot and offer yourself up as the solution. The very people you are trying to reach—the people who have perhaps lost faith in the electoral process, in traditional parties, in the media or in institutions like Parliament—are not people who are going to be particularly receptive to any effort on part of MPs, the traditional media or even social media companies to intermediate in this process, because they just do not trust those institutions. If anything, things that you say to that effect might be used against you, in the sense that it will only feed into their distrust of institutions.

So what can be done about it? Those organisations and individuals who have successfully navigated the environment of deep distrust have reached out successfully to potential antagonists. They have reached out successfully to institutions or organisations that they might not have had the best of relationships with and have sought to build bridges, first on a human level, and then expand from those human bridges to more policy or institutional ones.

Let me give you a couple of examples. The first is from someone who was appointed chairman of a peace commission in the state of Kaduna in north-central Nigeria. Unfortunately, the state of Kaduna has to deal with a lot of violence, and that tends to be manufactured violence, centred particularly around election season to affect election outcomes. Part of what the chairman of the peace commission does in her role is to figure out who those potential antagonists are on social media who really incite the crowds during election season. She reaches out to them, well in advance of the electoral process—two years before, in effect—and starts building bridges between them, humanising them to each other and to herself, the peace commission and its work.

Through that informal network of social media influencers getting to know each other better, they do not magically change their perspectives and make all the violence go away—but as Michelle Obama famously said, you cannot hate someone when you know them. What this individual successfully did was to humanise the potential antagonists in a situation of deep violence, and use that as a way to mitigate—though certainly not eliminate—the violence. That might be one example.

In the political arena, another quick example—though perhaps not in the spirit or intent of what this hearing was expecting to hear—is what President Trump did with Joe Rogan, the podcaster, as part of his election campaign last year. Joe Rogan is a very influential podcaster with millennials, men in particular, and had been sceptical of and averse to Trump, seeing him as a crook and so forth. Trump reaches out to Rogan, builds a relationship with him and eventually becomes a guest on Rogan's podcast, and Rogan become one of Trump's biggest supporters, fans, champions and so on. That might not be an instance of the kind of example you had in mind, but it shows how an individual or an organisation is able to reach out to antagonists and potential antagonists and work with them to effectively bring them on to their side.

Rather than the MPs themselves, the Electoral Commission, Parliament more broadly or the established media such as the BBC trying to do that—I think that would be futile—it would probably entail working with the very organisations that you see as part of the problem at the moment, building bridges to them and helping them to be part of the solution you are seeking to effect—recognising, of course, that they have genuine policy disagreements and that that is part of the source of their discontent and outrage.

Q206 **Zöe Franklin:** I think my question follows on quite nicely from where Professor Ramanna and others have started, but I want to turn things round slightly and ask: what can we do as politicians to get us closer to the people who feel most disaffected? I am struck that the data appears to show younger generations to be more likely than older ones to say that abuse is acceptable, and only 55% of the under-35 population vote, compared with about 78% of the over-65 population. From the conversations I have had with young people, particularly in schools, I keep hearing that they do not feel heard and they do not feel that politicians are saying anything that resonates with their worldview and the challenges they feel—that sense of fear, the sense of their ordeal and the ideologies of other that we have talked about.

Are there things we as politicians can do, as part of everything that needs to be done on this issue, that perhaps would start to address that perceived inaccessibility of politicians to sectors of the community who are feeling disaffected and responding in what I think we would all describe as a negative way?

Elisabeth Costa: Perhaps I can offer some inspiration from an example of a schools-based project that flips around the issue of trust and looks at who the trusted messengers are, very much putting students at the

centre. I will explain what the programme is, and we can perhaps then talk about how it could be adapted to this situation.

The programme is called Roots and was designed by US academic called Betsy Paluck. Its objective was to reduce bullying and conflict in US schools. Betsy ran the programme in 54 US schools, with about 24,000 students. The ingenious thing she did was that instead of thinking about a top-down education approach—telling students why bullying is wrong and what to do about it—she identified what she called the social referents in the schools, which was essentially the students who were really well connected within the schools and could influence their peers. That was not the popular kids, because they actually have a very stratified social network—they just talk to and influence each other—it was really the kids who sat in the middle of the social structure and had friends across different parts of the school. They were able to influence students and people across the whole school.

Once she had identified those students, she went to them and said, "What do you want an anti-bullying intervention to look like? What do you think would work in this school? What do you think would work with your friends and your peers?" She gave them the agency to design it. After two years, she saw a 30% reduction in conflict in those schools.

We are currently running a large-scale replication of that study here in the UK, in schools across the country. The real principles of the Roots programme are to identify those students in the schools who have real social influence, and who their peers trust, go to them and ask them what they want from their MPs. What do they want from the political process? What do they want an engagement from MPs to look like? Then listen to them and think about how to respond to that.

Chair: We are getting near to a vote, so I want to move us on a bit.

Q207 **John Slinger:** Liz, how would you design an effective, impartial civic education programme for schools to dispel the idea that abuse is acceptable as part of the political process? You touched on this in your previous answers, but it strikes me that we really do need to remind people that behaviour that is illegal, or completely unacceptable, and would probably result in the police stopping you doing it happens routinely online. There are almost no consequences, ever, and particularly when it comes to MPs. What would you do to counter that view?

Liz Moorse: I have talked about the role of citizenship education as opposed to civics. There is a clue in the name. The reason why it is citizenship and not civics is because civics has this kind of traditional, knowledge-driven approach to it, and we know that citizenship and political education works best when it is issues-based, with active learning, and with plenty of room for deliberation, discussion and practical, experiential learning. That is why the word citizenship was chosen, as opposed to civics, to give this a place in the curriculum.

The idea of impartiality is really critical here. There is a law in place about what teachers must do to remain impartial, and guidance is offered that was developed by the previous Government—I have to say that it was written in a particularly confusing style, to the extent that our organisation rewrote the guidance in a more understandable format that clarified their roles and responsibilities, and designed it around classroom practices and pedagogies.

A good citizenship education needs to have the bones of the core concepts of democracy, human rights and the rule of law at its heart. There need to be areas of study that include media and information literacy and the role of the media in a democratic society. It is a force for good as well as potential harm. We do a lot of focusing on the harm of the media and social media without counterbalancing that with the with the fact that we need our media to hold those in power to account and to ask the difficult questions on our behalf.

Going back to the earlier question, there are some very specific things that politicians can be part of in a good citizenship programme. We know that direct contact with politicians plays a really important role in good citizenship education. We ran a project called a parallel election to coincide with the general election last year. We trialled it and worked with about 400 schools. It exactly mirrored the processes that were running through the general election, to bring that learning to life. That is the key.

In order to provide spaces and places to develop the critical thinking skills that Professor Ramanna was talking about, and make connections between the concept and ideas and the tricky, complex issues that you are learning about, we need to link those together through practical experiences. That needs to be put into a refreshed and reformed national curriculum. It needs to have statutory status. It needs to be statutory from primary through to post-16; it is too late to start in secondary education, not least with the possibility of lowering the voting age becoming a reality. Children in schools will be registering to vote and will be voting, and we need to prepare the ground for that and use it as a moment to re-engage and restimulate the citizenship education curriculum.

The structuring of the curriculum needs to be designed around concepts and competencies—it needs to bring those two together. The issues, case studies and topical examples will change all the time. It was not very long ago that we were concerned about sexting. Now, we don’t really talk too much about that. Language has moved on. We are talking about algorithms, deepfakes and other things. Our teachers need the time, space and training to become skilled in those areas to really do a good job of that.

It is very possible to design a better citizenship curriculum than the one we currently have. The current framework has only 14 teaching requirements for a period of 10 years of secondary education; in contrast, maths teaching has about 420. The size and weight is completely out of proportion with the need. We need to strongly encourage our Government,

which is currently undertaking a curriculum and assessment review, to put the heart and soul back into citizenship education. It is not a luxury part of the curriculum for a few; it is absolutely essential and core to the knowledge, understanding and skills that we need every child to have, regardless of background or circumstance.

It is perfectly possible to do this, but we do need to invest in teacher training too. We need specialist teachers who can do real deliberative practices, but that is complicated: it involves technical, pedagogical approaches, and using distancing techniques and strategies to do that well in classrooms so that we really build knowledge-informed critical discussions and debates that are about seeking consensus, rather than adversarial, oversimplified discussions based on very sparse information, or perhaps opinion.

Although I completely agree with asking students about the issues that concern them—this is something that politicians can be part of—we also need to ensure that they are speaking from a place of knowledge and understanding. If we start with just opinions without building up knowledge and understanding, we will have a problem. We need to do it in a rounded way, and we need to do it much more comprehensively, cohesively and consistently across schools in the country.

Q208 **Sir Jeremy Wright:** Just a quick question: I am interested in your view of how important it is to teach complexity in decision making. One of the things that strikes me is that it is much easier to think ill of a politician if you think it is a simple choice: they could have done the right thing or the wrong thing, and they chose, in my view, the wrong thing. That leads you down a path towards saying, "They must therefore have improper motives of some kind, because it's an obvious choice, isn't it?" Most political decisions, as we all know, are much more complex than that. Is it important, in your view, to inculcate the idea of complexity in decision making at an early stage, so that people at young ages can say to themselves, "Maybe there's a reason the politician decided as they did, and I should just check and hold on for a moment before I assume base motives were involved?"

Liz Moorse: Absolutely. I think we sometimes underestimate our children's and young people's ability to understand and handle complexity. I mentioned the word deliberation; we developed a project called the Deliberative Classroom specifically for that. It was originally designed partly in response to Prevent and countering extremism and terrorism, but the principles of deliberation use some of the techniques you see in citizens' juries and assemblies and in Committees such as this: looking in detail and depth at issues, deliberating over them and trying to find a consensus basis for making recommendations that hopefully will influence those in Government.

Exactly the same thing can happen in classrooms, and we have a programme designed around that. In fact, we were here just yesterday: our national summer teaching conference took place here in Parliament, with 80 or so teachers in the room, called "From the classrooms to the

Commons". We had a couple of politicians with us for part of the day, and we were modelling some of the practices and pedagogies that encourage that kind of deeper thinking and critical analysis. We need teachers, though, who are skilled at bringing together different sources of information—reliable sources—to provide the knowledge and perspectives on these complex issues.

Once you get children and young people engaging in things like that, they better understand what is happening here. I also think select Committees can do a job of involving young people more. I know some of that happens some of the time, but inquiries can encourage schools to hold their own mini-select committee hearings and inquiries. They are perfectly capable of doing that and contributing to inquiries with their own evidence base. I absolutely agree with you on that.

Chair: Does anyone online want to come in, or can we go to the next question? Thank you.

Q209 **Rebecca Paul:** We have touched on some of this, but younger generations are more likely than older ones to say that abuse is acceptable; I am interested in why you think that is and whether you have any concerns that that could get worse over time.

Professor Karthik Ramanna: I am happy to come in on that—it connects to what I briefly alluded to earlier on brain plasticity. Effectively, the brain is continuing to develop up until generally the age of 25. Certainly, under the age of 16, the brain is very plastic, so subjecting people to dopamine-inducing processes such as social media feedback loops, which are very high velocity, effectively changes the way the brain functions, and that could get locked in.

We have very little evidence on this, because of course we are going to grow into this problem as the 25-year-olds who have grown up on social media become 35-year-olds and 45-year-olds and so forth. Whether the problem will reverse as they age, or whether it will be baked in, is something that we do not yet know. But the addictive properties of social media, when those with underdeveloped or partially developed brain structures are exposed, make it especially damaging.

Without wanting to be alarmist about it, it is perhaps not too dissimilar to the idea of feeding you know, an under 16 year old, a pack of cigarettes; we would not do that because it is highly addictive. In the same sense we need to think about what our public policies around social media exposure, for under-16s in particular, but potentially even under-25s, look like. It is hard to see how the social media companies will come up with a solution on own because they have very little commercial incentive to solve this problem on their own, and they will have their own prisoner's dilemma problem vis-à-vis each other. This will require some sort of collective action, potentially at a global or subnational scale.

I just want to quickly come in on the two other points that were raised. One is on what politicians can do, and the second is on complexity. In my own work, trust building starts with, delivering victories on small

promises. Part of the reason someone is not trusted, whether you are a politician or not, is that you made a promise that you cannot keep. Solving a problem such as depolarisation is a promise you cannot keep, because it is much bigger than any one politician or country.

The capacity to identify a part of this problem that you can measurably deliver on in the short run to build a coalition involves diverse perspectives—including potential antagonists, as I said earlier—and then to deliver on that solution in some finite time period such as a year or two years: that is the basis on which you build trust to do the next thing and the next thing. Organisations and leaders that have been successful at navigating that polarisation problem have made modest promises and delivered on those promises, and then used that victory to move on to slightly more ambitious promises and the like.

Finally, on the point of complexity, it is really important. There are two things that are a large part of the curriculum in the programme and course that I run at Oxford University—admittedly, that is a professional and graduate programme, but I do not see why it cannot be taught in schools.

One element is problem identification. Too often in educational settings, we provide students with neat and well-defined problems. We say, "Today we're going to do an economics problem; tomorrow we're going to do a problem in civics or political science, and the day after we'll do a problem in law." In the real world, problems do not come so neatly packaged in disciplinary silos. We spend a lot of time giving people the complexity and mess of real-world situations and help them to build good judgment in defining a problem and deciding what part of the massive situation that they are presented with they can tackle.

The second part we focus on in the complexity education is silo-busting. How do you bring expertise from different academic disciplines and bases and build a skill where you can connect across the languages or the axiomatic frameworks that different groups of experts might be using to solve complex problems in public policy? Silo-busting or cross-disciplinary thinking—however you want to frame it—and problem identification are often two things in the curriculum that are underemphasised. Again, I do not see any reason why they cannot be part of high-school curriculums as well.

Q210 **Chair:** Professor Fenwick?

Professor Helen Fenwick: Do you want me to comment on the issues that have just been raised?

Chair: If you want to comment, do—if not, don't worry.

Professor Helen Fenwick: In relation to changes in education, I agree with what has been said about raising critical thinking faculties because that in itself aids children in negotiating social media. I know that we focus quite a lot on social media; the problem is not just confined to social media, but it is clearly exacerbated by it.

In my view, it is more than just the problem of using abusive language or the distrust of politicians and so on. It is not just exacerbated by the existence of social media; to some extent it is fuelled by social media. I already mentioned things such as navigating false information. The promulgation of false information on social media obviously means it is far more effective. In terms of trying to make under-18s more resilient in relation to the kind of issues that we are talking about, then we should try to focus on enhancing critical thinking faculties in schools in various ways.

In terms of the complexity of the problem, a number of the issues have already been addressed. It is important to have greater awareness, in particular among under-18s, of the dangers of social media. Ofcom has done a lot of studies recently in relation to the implementation of the Online Safety Act—but not just about the implementation, because there is an educational aspect of the Act as well as a punitive one.

Ofcom has found that the further down the age range one goes, the more that under-18s are aware of the toxic content on social media and the more nervous they are of particular phenomenon on social media. They have named, for example, so-called "suicide sites", sites that promote self-harm and sites that have an impact on things like eating disorders. They have also talked about cyber-bullying.

Under-18s seem to be more aware of the problems of social media, and the problems that it creates in their lives. That could be creating distress or feeling nervous about using social media, but at the same time feeling that if they do not use it, they will be isolated because all their friends use it. There is an impact: if they become isolated in social media terms; they think they will become isolated in real-life terms as well.

The discussion about programmes and raising awareness of these issues in schools is clearly valuable, but I do not think that is enough. If we are talking about online abuse of MPs, we have to move beyond considering improvements in school curriculums. Clearly, that is necessary and has already been discussed, but I think improvements can be made. We already have a framework, the Online Safety Act, which I have mentioned already. It could be used more effectively. MPs have received death threats and rape threats. Some research shows that the kind of threats MPs have received online have almost become part of everyday life. If you are receiving online threats, you are not sure who they are from—they are often anonymous or from a fake account. Then, when an MP is in their constituency, they will not know if somebody coming into a meeting, or just walking past them in the street, could be the person who has been sending them those threats.

There is quite a lot of room for using the existing framework to try to hold the tech companies to account. Some of the tech companies are more likely to be compliant than others—that is fairly clearly the case. Some of the owners of tech companies have been invited to speak to the British Parliament, but they have not always been very receptive. There is a failure of the democratic process in some ways in the sense that, aside from any sort of punitive sanctions, tech company bosses like Mark

Zuckerburg have been invited to speak to Parliaments, not just in the UK but around the world, and they have not been very receptive to talking to MPs or parliamentarians, which I think is unfortunate. Obviously in the UK we are talking about the Online Safety Act, but the effort to regulate the online environment is global.

Efforts could be made in Parliament to consider how the Online Safety Act could be made more effective and to call Ofcom to account. I am sure Ofcom is prepared to be called to account, but nevertheless we have to look at what it actually does. Ofcom is meant to be the online regulator, and it is, but how effective is it? How far is it prepared to use its sanctions, when the kind of very toxic material I am talking about is hosted on various platforms and has a psychological impact on MPs? There is a lot of evidence of psychological impact, and disproportionately on women MPs. There is a case for saying that a legal response has to be taken into account as well as an educational one, in a general, holistic response that is not confined to only one particular initiative.

Q211 **Chair:** Elisabeth or Liz, would you like to add anything to that—briefly, as we are due to go to a Division?

Elisabeth Costa: I have two quick things to leave you with. First, on the shifting social norms, many younger people have grown up in an environment where they are digital natives; they see this amplification online and are not able to calibrate it against other parts of life. It should be reflected back to society that it is still a real minority of people who are perpetrating this kind of abuse—it is a growing issue, but it is a still a minority. It is not the normative behaviour.

The second thing goes back to hot state decision making. There is a lot that can be done online to try to create moments of pause and reflection. There are studies that have been really effective, such as reducing abusive comments online by a third. You could think about doing that on your MP contact forms as well, and having something to say, "Actually, would you like to reconsider or redraft this message?"

Liz Moorse: I have two quick things. As well as parliamentarians, MPs and Lords working with schools on good citizenship education and being part of a conversation with young people, please use the opportunity of lowering the voting age to make the connection with strengthening citizenship education. We should not have one without the other. There is a danger that the legislation that is coming through may be presented without a call for strong, good-quality citizenship education to be an entitlement for every pupil in this country.

Chair: That is great. Thank you all for your contributions, both online and here with us. If there is anything you want to add, please do not hesitate to send us anything.