



HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT

Joint Committee on Human Rights

Oral evidence: Democracy, free speech and freedom of association, [HC 1890](#)

Wednesday 30 January

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Members present: Ms Harriet Harman (Chair); Karen Buck; Joanna Cherry; Jeremy Lefroy; Baroness Hamwee; Baroness Lawrence; Baroness Prosser; Lord Trimble; Lord Woolf.

Questions 1–6

Witness[es]: Vicky Ford MP, **Chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Women in Parliament**; Sir Graham Brady MP, **Chair, 1922 Committee**; Dr Lisa Cameron MP, **Chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Disability**; Julie Elliott MP; John Cryer MP, **Chair, Parliamentary Labour Party**.

Q1 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed to our witnesses, who have come to give us evidence today for our inquiry. For the benefit of members of the public who are present or watching, we are the Joint Committee on Human rights, and we are half Members of the House of Lords and half Members of the House of Commons. We are concerned with freedom of speech, the right to protest, the right to life and the whole range of human rights. This includes the right to live in a democratic country, to be able to cast your vote and to have an MP able to get on with their job, which is why we have invited you to come and give evidence to us.

We are very grateful that we have Sir Graham Brady, who is the chair of the 1922 Committee of Conservative Members of Parliament; we have John Cryer, the chair of the Parliamentary Labour Party; we have Vicky Ford and Julie Elliott, who are the chair and vice-chair of the parliamentary women's caucus; and we have Lisa Cameron, who is here on behalf of the Scottish National Party. Thank you very much indeed for joining us. I would like to set a few questions in front of you and then ask you to say what you think about them.

First, we have heard a lot recently about threats, abuse, people being convicted for committing crimes against MPs, threats to MPs' staff and their families. Are these just the odd incident or is this widespread, and, if there is a problem, does anybody know the scale of it?

Secondly, how resilient should we be? Should the law protect us in the same way as it protects an ordinary person in the street, or, as people who have put ourselves forward for election, who are in public life, should we really be tough, resilient and prepared to take abuse and threats as part of the job? Where should the line be drawn? Is it being drawn in the right place?

What do you understand to be the experience of MPs when they complain about someone challenging or threatening them? Do they get a consistent response from the police? Do the police know whether they are supposed to be protecting the MP or protecting the right of the person who is challenging and threatening the MP?

Are you aware of MPs changing the way we do our work? Are we changing the way we undertake our surgeries and where we undertake them? Are we changing the way the way we advertise where we are going in advance? Are we changing the way we travel? Are we changing the way we interact with the public? Are we retreating from the public because of this, and is that a problem?

How does social media interact with all this? Julie Elliott is a member of the DCMS Select Committee, which has looked at this in some detail. Is social media a new problem here?

Finally, is it just a problem for women MPs, is it particularly a problem for women MPs, or it is a problem for all MPs? That is me setting the scene with some questions. If you would like to, one by one please say what you think about those and anything else that comes within that ambit. Once again, we are really grateful to you for coming to speak to us about any experience you have, but also about what you hear from our parliamentary colleagues. Shall we start with you, Sir Graham, since you are the man of the moment?

Sir Graham Brady: That aside, on the question of how widespread it is, it is important to say, first, that none of this is new. There have been threats to Members of Parliament, and Members of Parliament have been attacked; we can all think of some who have been in fairly recent history. Some have been murdered by terrorists and others have lived with the threat of that for a very long time. None of it is new at all. My sense is that it is more widespread at the moment and that social media is probably one of the reasons for it. It tends to coarsen discourse. We even saw this—I have not been here for as long as you have, Chair—in the advent of emails. We are all familiar with the late-night email from people who might not have given as much consideration to what they are saying as they should have. Technology has worsened the problem.

My view, and in so far as I can speak for them my colleagues' overwhelming view, is that we should be treated much the same as other members of the public when it comes to the protection of the law. It is to a reasonable extent possible to say that while the protection of the law should be the same, one might expect Members of Parliament to be somewhat less sensitive than members of the public who do not put

themselves forward in the public eye in certain situations and circumstances. We should be prepared to accept people expressing views to us and sometimes maybe doing that in a forceful way, whereas an ordinary member of the public might reasonably be a little frightened and taken aback if somebody came up to them in the street and started telling them what they thought about something. I guess that goes with our role, to a point.

Especially in the light of recent history and sacrifices made by the police here protecting Parliament, it is important that we recognise the very good work that is done. You highlight an important point about the consistency of approach in policing. I can think of an example of this, but stop me if I have taken too much time and you want to move on. The policing of the Conservative Party conference in Manchester two or three years ago was not as professional as it often is with similar conferences. There was a very high level of contact between protesters and representatives at the conference. Some of it was very intimidating. There was abuse, there were threats.

I personally experienced somebody wearing a facemask trying to provoke a reaction from me, constantly dropping down on their haunches in front of me as I was trying to walk somewhere. After this ended, I spoke to a police officer who had watched the whole thing. I said, "Did you not think it would have been a good idea to intervene and just make sure that it did not escalate?" He said, "I quite agree with you, sir, but we have our operational instructions". That has been taken on board and we had another conference in Manchester subsequently where the policing was absolutely fine. Getting that consistency of approach is really important.

My only other comment in the first instance is in the context of this place and the immediate environment. In the just over 20 years I have been here, while we have seen a probably exponential increase in the level of security, in terms of the numbers of armed police and the extent to which they are armed and so on, other aspects of the policing around the estate are less attentive than they used to be. We both remember that, when sessional orders were moved at the beginning of every session, there was a declaratory statement of a duty to make sure that Members could come here and leave without being impeded. It may have had no legal force, but it appeared to give a different attitude and an expectation that Members of Parliament coming and going was a very important part of keeping our democracy alive and healthy.

One also thinks of the situation for those Members who drive into the estate regularly and leave in cars. Now, people regularly queue, with members of the public very close to them on either side. It is very often at predictable times, when Divisions might have taken place, and it is an obvious security threat, as it would be in Westminster Tube station following predictable hours of voting.

Chair: Thanks very much. Shall I go to the other end of the table and ask Julie to respond?

Julie Elliott: I disagree with Graham slightly, in that I do not think it is the same as it has always been. Yes, we have always had instances, sadly, of MPs being murdered and being attacked. Those have both happened before. But what we are experiencing now is a constant change in behaviour from a certain section of society.

I entered the House of Commons in 2010, since when I have seen a dramatic change. I think the referenda have a lot to do with triggering this. My first experience of this kind of out-of-control behaviour was when I was campaigning in the Scottish independence referendum. When the EU referendum started, it went to a completely different scale. I come from 35 years in politics, being a trade union official. I am not frightened of robust political debate or arguments being put; that is absolutely not where I am coming from. But this is now a persistent, constant thing that we have to deal with. I think it is impacting on women Members far more than on men. From my point of view, it is beyond acceptable.

In terms of how resilient we are, Members of Parliament are resilient people. By the very nature of what we put ourselves forward to do, to go through selection rounds and get elected, you cannot be a shrinking violet. You have to be fairly robust. As a group of individuals, I do not think we are not resilient people, but this is reaching a point, or probably reached a point some time ago, where what is going on is not acceptable. The vast majority of people we meet in our constituencies and in Parliament are very pleasant and very nice, even if you have totally different viewpoints. I would like to stress that this is not all of society. This is a small group of people. We are being threatened. We should be treated the same as any other individual by the police and security people. A line has to be drawn. I would describe it as what we accept as usual behaviour and what is beyond the line of usual behaviour. Once something crosses that line, it should be clamped down on quite severely. As far as policing is concerned, I cannot fault the way my force in Northumbria has handled the threats I have had, some of which have ended up in court and people have been found guilty. Some have not for various reasons, but it is ongoing and it is constant. I cannot fault the way my experience has been with Northumbria. I know my colleagues from the north-east have had the same experience.

Speaking to colleagues from around the country, it varies entirely. It sometimes varies when you have built a relationship with an inspector, a superintendent or somebody else, and then there is a change of personnel. That can make a difference. The response across the country is very variable. We need an all-round approach to tackle it, because the response in Sunderland, which I represent, in Newport in Wales, in Glasgow in Scotland and in the Home Counties should be exactly the same. We should not have this variance in approach depending on which police area we have.

Regarding the way we work, I can only say that the way I work has completely changed in the last two or three years. I live two miles from

where I was born, so I am of and from the area I represent. I cannot walk down the street and not know somebody, whether it is through the job I do, because I have gone to school with them, because they have gone to school with my kids or whatever. That is the other thing to say: Members of Parliament are people and we have lives apart from being Members of Parliament. I have staff, I have children, I have lots of grandchildren and I am involved in all their lives. When you are doing that, of course you speak to people if they come up to you and want to talk to you as their MP. Usually, there is that understanding that they want to say hello, or they have an issue and you tell them how to get in touch, but they respect that you are doing things with your grandkids.

This is changing the way I operate, and I know a lot of other MPs operate, in that if we have a particularly difficult situation going on I will not wander down the beach with my grandkids because I will not expose them to that threat in case something happens.

Moving on to social media, in many ways it has been fantastic—Facebook, Twitter, all these platforms—but there is an element of people who are abusing this and they are managing to disrupt us in doing our job. As a recent example, something was posted and went into the public domain about some campaigning that I and other MPs were doing around the area at meeting points. Some of the people I have difficulty with then decided to try to organise protests around those places. I and other colleagues who were exposed in that way had to have the police there. They ran a very, very quiet operation, being with us and around us, so that we could do what any MP should be able to do, which is go and talk to residents about problems they are experiencing. That is the job we do.

In terms of interfering with democracy, it is absolutely trying to interfere with democracy, because it is trying to stop us doing what we should be doing. On that day they did not turn up, but they had created a hoo-hah and the police had had to put a response in place in case they did.

Most MPs used to do surgeries around the patch with open invitation, not knowing who was going to turn up. I do not do that any more. I do as many surgeries, I see as many people, but they are all by appointment and they are all in my office where we have levels of security and protection, not just for me but for my staff, who are coming to work and doing a job. It is the same wherever we go. We do not advertise what we do any more. We advertise when we have done something.

They are not getting away with what they are trying to do, which is to disrupt what we do, but we have to be creative all the time. What are the implications if we do this? How do we do it? It is never ending, and getting worse and worse, from my point of view. It is not scaling down, it is scaling up.

At the end of the day, being an MP is a huge privilege and a huge honour, but it is a job. When you are doing a job, you should be able to do it in a safe environment. That is where the balance lies between the rights of protesters—and I would always defend the right to protest; I have been

on numerous marches and demonstrations over the years, but you do it peacefully—and the rights of MPs to get on with what we are paid to do and not be at risk by virtue of the job we are doing.

Vicky Ford: I chair the APPG for Women in Parliament, which is the women's caucus. I also sit on the Women and Equalities Select Committee, where we have just done two inquiries into harassment, one in public places, one in the workplace. I am also on the Science and Technology Select Committee, where we have just finished our inquiry into the impact of social media on mental health. That will be published tomorrow. I have also just taken part in what was called the gender-sensitive Parliament audit, as part of the better Parliament initiative.

I want to look at four different reports that have come out recently, which I think are interesting. One is the Inter-Parliamentary Union report on sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians across Europe. The second is the 2017 review by the Committee on Standards in Public Life on intimidation in public life. The third is the Amnesty International report that looked at qualitative and quantitative research on the experience of women politicians and women in public life in both the UK and the US. The fourth is the Fawcett report; 2,300 local councillors and 13% of local government councillors across the UK took part in that research.

First, this is a real issue, it is different from what has happened before, and it is not just in the UK. The IPU report published at the end of last year looked at 123 women from 45 different countries, 81 of whom were Members of Parliament. Of those women, 85% said they had suffered psychological violence in the course of their office; 46% had received death threats or threats of rape or beating; 58% had been the target of online sexist attacks on social networks; 67% had been the target of comments related to physical appearance; 25%, one in four women, had suffered sexual violence; 15% had suffered physical violence. It is particularly challenging for women under the age of 40 and for women active in the fight against gender inequality or violence against women.

The Amnesty report, which is called Toxic Twitter, looked in particular at how Twitter has become such a challenging place for female users. Many women no longer feel able to express themselves freely on the platform. It is targeted particularly at women journalists and politicians.

The Committee on Standards in Public Life said sort of what Graham said, that intimidation in public life is nothing new, but the scale and intensity of intimidation is now shaping public life in such a way that it is a serious issue. Social media companies have been too slow to take action. Political parties have failed to take leadership and police authorities have shown inconsistency. That was in the committee's report in 2017. One of my concerns is that we felt, back in 2017, that this was just a general-election thing and that it was at the peak of intensity. But we have seen that the intensity is still there and is continuing.

Back in 2014, in the European elections, before I went out campaigning every day I put on Twitter, on social media, where I was going to be in my morning session, my lunchtime session, my evening session—"Meet me on the corner of X street and Y street. Good to see you". People would come out and meet us. There is no way one would do that today.

Q2 **Chair:** Do you think that is a shame? Have we lost something with that?

Vicky Ford: Yes, it is a great shame, but it is not just a UK issue. We had the Women MPs of the World meeting here, with 100 women from all over the world. At our breakout session, it was really interesting that women from all over the world said time and time again that the harassment and abuse they get on social media has led to real threats, physical threats, which compromise their ability to get on with their jobs.

As an example, back in 2015 when I was leading the reforms of European gun law, I received a social media post of the floor of the Bataclan theatre and the message, "You are next". At the time, we did not really know how to report those threats. Some people said, "You should have reported it", but by the time you try to scroll back it has been deleted. That sort of a threat is particularly scary, because you know it is from someone who has guns. When you are getting threats from the gun lobby, it is particularly scary.

In the 2017 election, a partially-sighted candidate who needs the assistance of a guide dog to canvass—she is that partially sighted—received death and rape threats on social media. It is putting off the candidate as well as the elected politician. I have subjected to micro-targeted ads taken out against me, and specific ads misrepresenting my position have been put on Facebook, just in my own area, targeted at people who were known to be very firm leavers. That also resulted in threats in my inbox. The technology is a real issue.

It is not just a threat against women ourselves but a threat against democracy, because it is preventing people, especially women, putting themselves forward as candidates. The Fawcett study, in which 2,300 councillors took part, as I said, reported, "A number of women pointed to constant abuse on social media as a key factor in preventing women from running for selection or election—especially when threats were directed at family members". Amnesty International said a similar thing: "Our research shows that there is a real danger that high levels of online abuse against women MPs will have a chilling effect on women taking part in public life—particularly women of colour". It is a real issue that risks putting women off standing for election, especially when threats are directed against family members.

In terms of the social media impact, look at the recent incident with the Member of Parliament for Broxtowe, when she was accosted on her way back from doing a TV interview here. In the past, if somebody had come up to you and harassed you, that would be a one-off incident, but today

that incident is filmed, put on social media and replayed again and again and again. The impact of social media tends to normalise these sorts of issues. That is what we have heard in the Science and Technology Select Committee when we have looked at childhood bullying through social media, for example. It is the same. It normalises it and then amplifies the impact. That is why what happens in social media can tip over to real, physical threats.

We know that at least three Members of Parliament have been very public about the death threats they have received. The Member for Liverpool Wavertree, the Member for Hackney North and the Member for Broxtowe have been very public. I am aware of a number of other women colleagues who have received death threats, where those threats have been acted on by the police and resulted in prosecutions. This has happened to a number of women colleagues who for many reasons do not want to make this public.

My strong belief is that we need to make sure that people have the right to protest and the right to freedom of speech. I do not want to ban protesters, because that could just give even more oxygen to their campaigns, but protesters do not have the right to stop women MPs going about their jobs. They do not have the right to threaten, intimidate or harass us.

It is a bigger issue for women in public life than it is for many individuals. When we get harassment on social media, we live in a time when our laws are not fit for purpose for a digital age. If you have to read through the social media, capture it, report it and then wait for the police to take action, it is too slow. Our laws need to be fit for purpose for a digital age. The Science and Technology Select Committee is about to make some suggestions on this which I fully endorse and you will be able to read tomorrow when they come out.

Dr Lisa Cameron: I do not want to reiterate the points that have already been made, but it has become much more widespread. Social media perpetuates that in a sense, particularly through its anonymity. It almost reinforces the fact that people can engage in the abuse of MPs and there is no consequence. It is therefore very, very difficult to follow that up through a legal route. That seems to exacerbate the situation, because it almost becomes the norm that people think it is okay and there is no consequence for them.

It can also be a trigger, as has been mentioned, because individuals on social media can use it collectively to incite abuse and risk towards MPs by posting where they are going to have events or posting misinformation about their stance on issues in order to generate that abuse. That is done very purposefully and collectively at times. There is a huge issue to do with the responsibility of social media and how we look at its role and responsibility collectively.

There are particular points in time that I would perhaps call flashpoints. The first death threat I had was a few days before the EU referendum. I

would have called that a flashpoint, because at that time people had very strongly held beliefs and views and perhaps were not happy with my point of view, and at that flashpoint they felt they wanted to contact me and to threaten me about my views. That was a very frightening experience, not just for me, I have to say, but for my family. I have young children. When the police come to speak about these things, your whole family is involved and bears the impact of it. There is a mental health impact from that.

Social media is an issue. There are flashpoints at times of high-profile votes and laws, and not just the referendum; elections are another flashpoint. The Syria vote was possibly another one. Where people have extremely strong beliefs on either side, there can be a flashpoint.

Having worked in a high-secure hospital prior to coming into Parliament, I was quite shocked by the lack of security for MPs when I arrived, not so much here at Westminster but at surgeries. There did not seem to be very many protocols about lone working and the risks. There were not many risk management plans or personal safety alarms in use at that point. That has dramatically improved. A lot of credit has to go to the Deputy Speaker and the team who have been putting that in place, but I was quite shocked by it. When I raised it with colleagues, individuals said, "Yes, but we have always gone to surgeries ourselves". Coming from a profession where I was dealing with patients routinely, we would never have put ourselves in that position. There was almost a bit of blasé-ness about it, and I am glad the risk management measures have improved.

The public and the authorities perhaps have a higher threshold in their expectation of the abuse that MPs should tolerate. A particular individual has been coming to the surgery with a megaphone and shouting at me quite routinely. I know that if that had happened to me in a surgery when I was working as a doctor, it would have been dealt with quite quickly by the authorities. It is almost as though that is okay—"You're an MP, so you should expect people coming to shout at you". That is frightening not just for the MP—you feel very vulnerable in that situation—but for the other people in the surgery who are affected by that and who perhaps do not want to come back to see their MP because they have had a negative experience when they have been to see them. It has a much wider impact upon our constituents.

There is also an intersectionality to it. As a woman, but also having Jewish family history, those issues are intersectional. The research indicates that you can be subject to more abuse online in particular, and particularly at those flashpoints. If there is a debate in Parliament, say on Holocaust Remembrance Day, that serves as a flashpoint for individuals to feel that they can come out and be very abusive online.

As for changing what I do, I do not have people drop in now without seeing staff and making an appointment, which makes you feel less accessible, but when I was working as a psychologist in the NHS I would not have done that; I would have had a planned appointment and there

would have been risk management for it. It is really important that we realise that there are risks and that we should have effective risk management, which has to be consistent, perhaps with guidance from PLAIT in Parliament to the different police authorities, so that the level of risk management to be expected is not a postcode lottery for MPs. That would be helpful, and it would probably bring us into line with other professions that deal with the public on an ongoing basis.

Q3 **Chair:** John, you are last but not least. This question has been raised in some of the points made by others. Do you think that the shouting and anger exhibited in the House, which we know does not spill over to threats of violence, plays a part in winding people up outside? Does that contribute to and somehow legitimise the escalating level of threats outside Parliament? If we can shout at each other in Parliament, why should someone not shout at us in the streets, since shouting is the way to go if you are an MP? Is that completely irrelevant? Say what you were going to say anyway.

John Cryer: I will start with that. We all visit schools, and this is one of the questions you get: "Why is behaviour so bad in Parliament?" What they are actually talking about is Prime Minister's Questions. They are not talking about any other time, generally, with the odd exception. Prime Minister's Questions is probably not a great advertisement for this place. Does that then reflect in society, so that people think it gives them licence to behave in a particular way? It would take a lot to convince me that that might be the case. There are all sorts of other pressures and processes that lead people to make the sorts of threats that, in my view and probably in the views of all of us, are more common than a few years ago. But it is not an ideal example. That is all I am saying.

I chair the weekly meeting of the Parliamentary Labour Party on a Monday evening. Then, on a Wednesday afternoon, I chair the meeting of the party's parliamentary committee, which is the ruling body of the PLP. It is equivalent to the executive of the 1922, which Graham chairs. I mention that, because the committee meeting in particular is often the conduit for events and experiences being reported to the committee. The committee is elected by the PLP. In effect, it is the joint shop stewards' committee, and people often report to it about experiences that have happened to MPs outside.

On Monday night, for instance, somebody raised a case of constant threats and abuse, morning, noon and night, and the police not doing anything. This is one of the questions you asked at the beginning. The police response is very, very variable. I am a London MP, and in my experience the response of the police has been pretty good. In other parts of the country, it has not been so good. I can think of MPs who have had threats and there is just no response from the police.

One thing that has changed is that we now have the police Parliamentary Liaison and Investigation Team. That was set up three or four years ago, and it has a number of purposes, one of which is this: say you contact your police locally in your constituency and their response is to say something along the lines of, "There's not an awful lot we can do". That is not uncommon, by the way, even with threats to kill. I can think of somebody who rang up an MP's office and said, "I have a carving knife. I'm going to come and chop your head off". The response of the local police was to say, "There's not a lot we can do". The MP said, "So I'll wait until I'm lying in a pool of blood and then you'll spring into action. Is that the general idea?" That MP rang the liaison team, who then contacted the local police. The response was pretty good after that and they did what was necessary.

Has the threat changed? It has always existed, to a large extent. You can go back to the assassination of Spencer Perceval in 1812. In the 1970s, there was Airey Neave. Robert Bradford, Ian Gow and others were attacked, and more recently Jo Cox. There have been attacks on other people; Nigel Jones springs to mind—his assistant was murdered with a samurai sword.

Is it getting worse? I do not have the facts and figures to back this up. This is only anecdotal, because it is based on people bringing problems to me and telling me about attacks, threats of attacks and abuse. I have been the chair for four years, and I would say that it is now almost constant. I am getting these examples brought to my attention weekly.

Does it affect women more than male MPs? Again, this is anecdotal, but I suspect it does. In the PLP, we are getting on for 50% women members, and it is 44% or 45% at the moment. An awful lot more women are getting these sorts of threats. A lot of male MPs also receive these. I have. I have had threats to kill. I know many male MPs who have had threats to kill and similar sorts of threats.

On work patterns, MPs are undoubtedly changing the way they do the job. That is often on the advice of police, and I do not blame the police for that, by the way. The police are simply giving the advice that they think is sensible, and very often it is sensible. We have had open door surgeries mentioned before. I used to do open-door surgeries. Now I do appointments. The police will advise you: "Do not do your surgeries in libraries. Do not do them in community halls. Do them in an office where there is protection, where it is easy to get out, where you can have the police in attendance".

Is that to be regretted? Yes, it is, because there always has to be a balance between safety and accountability. Much of the advice moves away from accountability and towards safety. Again, you can understand why that advice is being given.

We have a vote. What should we do? Should we break?

Chair: We have had an excellent set of thought-provoking representations. Unless there is additional material that my colleagues want to ask questions on, I would let you go.

Joanna Cherry: I think we should ask a few more questions. I am just not sure how many votes there are.

Chair: Are you coming back? Sorry, could you bear with us? I know you have to go, Sir Graham.

Sir Graham Brady: I have to go just before 4 pm but, for reasons I will not go into, I am paired, so I am not permitted to vote. I am very happy to stay for 10 minutes.

Chair: I would very much appreciate that. We have to go and vote. Would those of you who are in a position to come back do so? Other Committee members would like to explore it further.

Vicky Ford: This is happening all over many countries. Changing PMQs is not the solution. It is a bigger issue. That may help.

Chair: I will see some of you back here.

John Cryer: I will finish what I was going to say when we come back.

The Committee suspended for a Division in the Commons.

Chair: Thank you very much, everybody, for bearing with us during the two votes. We were hearing from John Cryer about the balance that needs to be struck between accountability and security. Could you proceed on from there, John?

John Cryer: Any assessment of a threat to an MP needs to be on the basis of the threat, which sounds a bit glib, rather than position. At the moment, if you are Secretary of State for Defence or Home Secretary, for instance, you get automatic protection, and it is pretty extensive from what I understand. By the way, that is quite right. I have no problem with that. If you are not a senior Minister with that kind of portfolio, there is less keenness in some quarters to take threats so seriously, and you can actually be under a greater threat.

I know one MP who had to move house a while ago because of threats. I know a small handful, but it is still a handful, of MPs who in the past have had physical protection, and in one or two cases still have physical protection. I am talking about women MPs, by the way. I cannot name people, which is frustrating. This is all on the record, so I cannot talk about particular cases, which is a difficulty. But in many of these cases some police forces simply do not take those threats seriously. Many police forces do. The Met, in my experience, takes it very seriously, unlike some other police forces.

I mentioned the liaison team, which is centralised here. It contacts police forces very rapidly. When an MP gets on to the liaison team, it will contact their local police force, the chief superintendent or somebody like that, very rapidly. I wonder if there should be some wider co-ordination—perhaps by the Met, because it is the biggest police force in the country—of the general protection of MPs and other elected representatives who are in need of it, rather than a piecemeal approach where you have to go

through your local police force, nothing happens, so you have to go through the liaison team and the liaison team gets on to your police force. It is not a particularly effective way of doing it.

I wanted to mention one other thing, and that is MPs' staff, because they are often overlooked. Bear in mind that when Nigel Jones was attacked, it was his member of staff who died, who was murdered, by a constituent who had been to see Nigel many, many times before, but there had never been any indication that there was a problem or a threat of violence.

Because I am chair of the PLP I have pretty regular meetings with the Unite branch, which many Labour researchers are members of. The Conservative researchers tend to be members of MAPSA, and I am sure they have stories as well. I am hearing—again, this is anecdotal—that more and more MPs' staff are experiencing threats, experiencing abuse and having to put up with it on a very regular basis.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed, John. I now throw it open to any other members of the Committee who would like to ask questions.

Q4 **Ms Karen Buck:** Can I go back to an earlier question about the amount of knowledge we have on the scale of threatening and violent behaviour? As somebody said, and I completely understand, there will be Members of Parliament who do not want to talk about it, for all kinds of legitimate reasons. What is being done, or should be done, to make sure that somewhere, within Parliament, within the process, we have an accurate overview of the scale of what is going on?

Julie Elliott: I do not think there is an accurate picture. In fact, I am absolutely sure there is no accurate picture. I can only speak for what is happening to Labour MPs, but we had a meeting of the women's Parliamentary Labour Party a couple of weeks ago, after the incident with Anna Soubry outside. The PLAIT team, people from the various social media companies, and people from the Deputy Speaker's group were all there. Even after the extensive involvement I have had with Northumbria, which is huge, I did not know that I was supposed not just to report things to Northumbria when anything happened, and it acts, but to report it to PLAIT, whose responsibility it is to draw this all together. We are now starting to do that, but if I did not know that, given the level of involvement I have had with my regional police force, I do not think many people would.

It is a movable feast. Since the incident with Anna, a lot of things have come to light. A lot of things seem to be happening in silos, and unless you happened to get involved with that part of what was going on you did not know about it. Moving forward, there is probably going to be a better picture, and that is one of the things we need to know. All this is anecdotal, and John is quite right that we are not naming names because a lot of people are not even talking publicly about it to any degree. Some

of the worst cases have been kept very quiet. Everybody deals with this in a different way.

The other thing is that a lot of MPs have ongoing cases which either the police or the CPS are looking at, and you are very limited in what you can say. It is fine for people to deal with it in different ways. An almost central register of what is going on is crucial in order to find a way forward and find some level of equality in the way things are dealt with.

Dr Lisa Cameron: I totally agree. Data is not being collected as it should, and that data is going to be crucial. I can only draw on my previous experience working in the NHS. We would fill out what was called a Datix form if there was an incident. Then it was collected centrally, and the police and the hospital would be able to look at it to see if there was a pattern, what risk management measures needed to be put in place, if there were any links between the incidents that were happening in different places or if the same perpetrators were doing things to different individuals.

I know it can be difficult or perhaps quite upsetting to report an incident, but it is not just about our own personal safety; we have a collective responsibility to other MPs to make sure that we can at least give basic information about what is happening so that the police have a good picture and authorities, including in Parliament, can put into practice the appropriate risk management measures that are needed to contain risk for all MPs.

Ms Karen Buck: Would it be true to say for the purposes of this inquiry that while part of this is about having a proper strategy for risk management, it is also about having a better understanding of scale so that one can see the extent to which this is having a potentially chilling or distorting effect on our politics?

Dr Lisa Cameron: Of course, and one will feed into the other. Once you know the scale, you know what you need to put in place.

Q5 **Joanna Cherry:** I wanted to turn to ask particularly about the social-media abuse of female MPs. I am sure John and Julie will be aware that according to Amnesty research Diane Abbott is the most abused female MP in the United Kingdom. I am looking at a report that came out on 4 September 2017 from Amnesty, which sampled nearly a million tweets between 1 January and 8 June 2017. That was in the run-up to the general election. I do not know whether any of you are familiar with that report. Lisa, I do not know if you might have some familiarity with it.

Dr Lisa Cameron: I have some familiarity with it, and I understand that Diane has been particularly targeted. That absolutely stood out and actually skewed all the figures for the research that was undertaken. That goes back to the intersectionality issue I mentioned before; if you are from an ethnic minority as well as being a woman, you are much more likely to be targeted than if you have one characteristic. I understand that

when they took out the figures for the horrendous abuse that Diane had experienced, female SNP MPs realised that we were at the top of the list for having suffered online abuse. Again, it is linked with these flashpoints. The EU referendum in particular is one of them.

Another aspect has to be the anonymity. People are doing and saying things online that they would not perhaps in the main go on to do, but it is very frightening to have that type of abuse and threat. It becomes highly risky when it is done in a co-ordinated fashion, where individuals are together, inciting each other towards that particular individual. Social media becomes an echo chamber for that. It is like a snowball effect and you do not know where it will lead or whether someone who sees it will go on to act on the information they see.

Julie Elliott: That has hit the nail on the head. There is a difference between the abuse online and the threats online. The abuse is where we are getting called liars or traitors; they are abusing how we look. Then there are threats, where they are threatening to kill us, kill our staff, kill our family or whatever. They are equally bad but different.

I have described it to many people in this way: people with these views have always been around, but they have probably gone to the pub and said these things to a very small group of friends, whereas now with social media it is ballooning. Various groups are tagging on to them and it is getting co-ordinated. In a city the size of Sunderland, with 300,000 people, you might have only 50 people doing this on a regular basis, but they are 50 people who were not in touch with each other before. Now they are co-ordinating and even, as you said before, co-ordinating around the country.

On the DCMS Committee, we have looked at the issues relating to Facebook and Twitter and the fake news agenda. The absolute nonsense out there that is getting repeated as fact is also whipping this up, whichever side of the political argument you come from. Some very far-right groups such as National Action are getting involved in this and turning up to demonstrations that these people are sorting out. There is all that going on.

From talking to the police, the laws to deal with this on social media are simply not there or they are not tested. I have had conversations about stalking and harassment legislation, where they are looking to see whether they can fit what is happening with social media into that, but it is not always a perfect fit. The laws are inadequate to deal with what is going on. It is almost a vicious circle. We know this is happening, we know the threats are there, but what do you do to deal with them and, in the middle of this, keep people safe but also allow people to express opinions? The answer is not straightforward.

John Cryer: The level of abuse Diane Abbott has received is through the roof. It is enormous. However, I have to add that she has some pretty stiff competition, because a lot of women MPs, particularly ethnic-minority women MPs, have had horrendous abuse. I have seen some of it. One or

two of them in particular have shown me printouts of this stuff, and it is page after page of racist abuse, threats to kill, rape threats, threats against their families and all that sort of thing. I am not particularly a fan of censorship, but I have to say that the technology companies are extremely slow to do anything about it. They leave stuff of the most horrendous nature up there for days or even weeks. Facebook springs to mind, by the way. I will just get that off my chest. It does not seem to do an awful lot to tackle this.

I did not answer Karen's question about the central gathering of information. Everything I have said today is anecdotal. I have no figures to back it up, so you are right: there should be some gathering of information. It would have to be anonymous. It is frustrating, giving evidence to the Committee this afternoon, because we cannot name anybody. Any gathering of information would have to be anonymous, because people will be very nervous about providing information where they might be named.

A few years ago, before the advent of social media, there was a story in the national press that a Labour MP had been subject to a death threat by a particular group. He was called by a journalist, and he said, "No, it's absolute nonsense. There's nothing in it". A few years later on when I became an MP I happened to know him, so I asked him about that episode. He said, "Oh, yes, it was true. I knew it was absolutely true, but if I said yes that would have been a green light to all sorts of people out there to have a go at me". As Julie said, 20 or 30 years ago, those people were not in touch with each other. They are now in touch with each other at the flick of a switch, and that is one of the most frightening things that have changed.

Joanna Cherry: I suppose I should declare an interest about the Amnesty report that I referred to, because after Diane I was the second most abused female MP in the United Kingdom. I have to emphasise that the report showed that Diane received almost 45.14% of all abusive tweets. Excluding Diane, black and Asian women MPs in Westminster received 35% more abusive tweets than white women. There clearly is a particular issue with black and minority ethnic women. Lisa, you mentioned that you have Jewish heritage. In relation to intersectionality, are you aware of any other sectarian elements to abuse, particularly for SNP MPs?

Dr Lisa Cameron: Things have moved on greatly in Scotland. A lot of work has been done, but there is still quite an element of sectarian abuse that you see online towards MPs, particularly if their faith is well known or if they are involved in cross-party groups linked with their faith. That is probably an issue that continues.

Joanna Cherry: You can work out which MPs are Catholic from looking at their Wikipedia page and the names of their schools, can you not?

Dr Lisa Cameron: Yes. If you were minded to do that, you could definitely research that sort of information. It would be readily available.

If individuals wanted to target people based on sectarian lines, that information is on their Wikipedia and online.

Q6 Jeremy Lefroy: Thank you very much. I am really grateful for all your evidence today. We have been talking about MPs, absolutely rightly, but we also all have lots of contact with local councillors. I also have a concern about councillors, particularly those who do their jobs assiduously and maybe make a lot of home visits.

Have you seen any advice for councillors in your own local authorities, because they are also very vulnerable in their position, particularly as they are often dealing with pretty hot local issues, whether it is planning, the health service and so on.

Dr Lisa Cameron: I declare an interest that my husband is a councillor. It may be changing, but one of the particular issues is that councillors' addresses are put on the ballot. I am married to a councillor, so my address is on the ballot and people understand that. For councillors, that is a particular risk. The Division Bell is ringing again.

Julie Elliott: One of my children is a councillor and that is an issue. They do not get the same level of support in general, and the death threats towards me have sometimes been aimed at councillors as well. There is no co-ordinated support for councillors in the way there is for MPs, even though that is not perfect. In the world we live in, we are moving away from addresses on ballot papers being a reality.

Just as you have small businesses in families, where they might all be butchers, bakers or whatever, if there is an interest in politics in the family you often get more than one member of a family involved in politics, so indirectly they can find out where you live, which is a real threat.

Chair: There is a vote now. You have been incredibly patient and given excellent evidence to help with our inquiry. Perhaps on behalf of the Committee I may thank you at this point.

John Cryer: I cannot come back after the vote. In some ways, councillors have it even worse. I have lived in London since I was 18, despite the accent. In London, boroughs were very often put together from smaller boroughs. Basically, if you are on my side of Waltham Forest, the town hall is right on the other side, so you cannot even have surgeries in your town hall or anywhere near the town hall. Councillors have to use local libraries, local community centres, which is exactly what we are being told not to do by the police.

In 2010, we had to put down our home addresses. There was an incident I was involved with where I was tracked down by a particular group, which I cannot name, and if I named them you would know why I cannot. There was a moment when I thought things were really going to get very, very dicey. The legislation that pertained then put parliamentary

candidates at particular risk. I am glad that is gone, but there are still other risks there.

Chair: Thank you very, very much indeed for your evidence.