

Written evidence submitted by Sir Desmond Swayne TD MP

My submission is that the proposal to add the additional principle of 'Respect' be abandoned and that the proposal in paragraph 58 (page 19) to add the investigable offence of unreasonable or excessive personal criticism in any medium also be abandoned. I see these two items as intimately connected.

I was surprised but delighted that the dons at the University Cambridge voted down a not dissimilar proposal for the inclusion of 'respect'.

It is, of course, not unprecedented that some nominal constraints be placed on the public 'ideological' stance of MPs. After all, we do require them to swear allegiance to the Crown. Nevertheless, such constraints should be the absolute minimum. By demanding adherence to a set of public policies (inclusion, diversity, anti-discrimination and anti-racism) -however desirable they may be- and to promote behaviours associated with them, is a step towards the Orwell's concept 'thought crime'. It would place a bar on the democratic choice of voters.

Though I find the views of certain 'far right' political organisations abhorrent it would be a grave error to, in effect, potentially exclude from Parliament any representative for whom they might secure election. It would give them a 'legitimate' grievance that democracy was being denied them.

Frankly, I find the politics and personal behaviour of some of these people abhorrent. I hold them in contempt. As an elected representative I have a right to make my opinions about them known, perhaps even a duty to do so. This is why I cannot support your determination to police the comments of MPs in any medium. This is where the similarity to the position taken by the Cambridge dons is pertinent: there are things we are entitled not to respect, not to include and to 'call-out' in terms which we judge appropriate: You cannot expect to have Satan too in an ecumenical movement.

Members of the public may indeed feel belittled, insulted or abused by the public comments of MPs. The giving and taking of offence however, is often a feature of freedom of expression. Citizens who do feel themselves to have been unfairly treated have both the protection of the law and, through social media, a means of reply (and many colleagues will have experienced just how liberally they make use of it).

Your proposal would have a chilling effect on our public discourse and undoubtedly generate many complaints with little merit. Furthermore, it would increase the temptation for colleagues to have much more extensive recourse to that medium where we cannot be questioned and where the subjects of our criticism do not have any protection from the law at all, namely in the Chamber of the Commons.

10 January 2022