

Countering harassment and intimidation of elected representatives

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The Security Minister delivered an update on the work of the Defending Democracy Taskforce to counter harassment and intimidation of elected representatives.

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your statement and with permission I will make a statement on the work the government is leading to defend our democracy and those who serve within it — particularly as we approach the local and devolved elections taking place in May.

Now Mr Speaker, twice in the last decade, devoted and beloved members of this House have been lost to abhorrent acts of violence.

Each time I enter this Chamber, my eyes are drawn to the shields dedicated to Jo Cox and to Sir David Amess.

They are not simply memorials. They are a daily reminder of the duty we owe to one another, and to our democracy, to ensure that no one is deterred from public service by fear, intimidation, or violence.

It is in that spirit that I come to the House today, to set out the challenge we face, what this government is doing, and to make clear what we will not tolerate.

Now Mr Speaker, the work of elected representatives at every level matters. It shapes millions of lives and our country's future.

That is why those entrusted to serve must be able to do so without fear or favour.

Free debate and honest disagreement are the lifeblood of democracy. But let me be clear: harassment, intimidation, abuse, and violence are not political expression.

And today, the volume, breadth, and tempo of threats against elected representatives is unprecedented.

Across this House, colleagues will recognise the grim reality:

Assaults. Vandalism. Stalking. Blockading. A blizzard of online abuse.

This is not theoretical. It affects Honourable Members, councillors, and candidates. It affects our families and our staff.

Women and ethnic minority representatives report the highest volumes of abuse, including overtly sexualised and racially charged threats, which has a chilling effect on who feels able to stand for public office.

When fear warps debate, when candidates step back, and when fewer people from diverse backgrounds feel able to stand, the damage is deep and lasting.

That is why this government treats harassment and intimidation not as an inevitable occupational hazard, but as a serious threat to our democracy itself.

Now I know that you share that stance, Mr Speaker, and I pay tribute to your leadership, especially through the work of the Speaker's Conference.

And our response is rooted in the Defending Democracy Taskforce, which I chair, working across government, law enforcement, Parliament, the Electoral Commission and the intelligence community.

The mandate of the Taskforce, renewed by this Prime Minister is clear: to tackle the full spectrum of threats to our democracy.

That means preventing and deterring harassment; ensuring real consequences when it does occur; and providing proportionate, effective security for everyone who participates in our democratic process.

This is a year-round task, but the upcoming local elections demand that we intensify our focus and where necessary, go further.

Now yesterday, I chaired a meeting of the Defending Democracy Taskforce with ministers from the devolved nations. It was a constructive discussion on strengthening our collective security posture ahead of May.

We reaffirmed our readiness to support colleagues in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The police are at the forefront of defending democracy efforts, and I thank officers and staff across the country for their dedication and diligence.

Ahead of the May elections, we are working with the College of Policing and National Police Chiefs' Council to strengthen guidance for frontline officers responding to incidents involving elected representatives.

It is essential that the consistency of police response is improved across all force areas, and I welcome the police's decision to act on the recommendations of your Conference, Mr Speaker.

I am pleased to be able to inform the House today that Deputy Chief Constable Chris Balmer, from Cambridgeshire Police, has been appointed to the role as the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for defending democracy.

And I have written to the Chair of the National Police Chiefs' Council, and to DCC Balmer, to stress the importance of their work to democracy itself. I emphasise the importance of keeping pace with the evolving threat abuse poses to democracy, and I will be meeting with them both shortly.

Every police force now has a dedicated superintendent co-ordinator for Operation Bridger, which handles the protection of Members beyond the Parliamentary estate.

Through Operation Ford, elected official advisers at working level exist to support both members of Parliament, and locally elected representatives.

I have extended the Operation Ford offer to cover all elected representatives across England, Scotland, and Wales, supported by a full-time network of 66 Home Office-funded force elected official advisers.

I am also pleased to announce the creation of a new threat assessment centre. This will support Operation Ford by centralising and co-ordinating intelligence nationally for incidents which target

locally elected representatives. This function will be live ahead of the local elections.

Now Mr Speaker, where the law fails to provide adequate protection, we will strengthen it.

We have seen protests deliberately targeted at private homes, timed to intimidate families and children, and designed to exert pressure through fear.

That is why the Crime and Policing Bill introduces a new offence to restrict protests outside the homes of public office holders.

Peaceful protest is a cherished right, but the doorstep of a private home is not an appropriate setting for it.

In addition, the Representation of the People Bill will introduce a new aggravating factor, empowering courts to hand down longer sentences to reflect the seriousness of crimes committed against those who serve our democracy: whether elected representatives, candidates, their staff, campaigners, and electoral officials.

Now Mr Speaker, many Members across this House and beyond have faced sustained online abuse and intimidation. Some have questioned whether to stand again.

This is simply unacceptable.

Through the Online Safety Act, the UK has established one of the strongest online safety frameworks in the world.

Services now have clear legal duties to identify, remove, and prevent illegal content; including threats, incitement and non-consensual intimate images, such as explicit deepfakes.

And as we approach the May elections, government will engage directly with major social media platforms to support and inform their election preparedness.

Now Mr Speaker, countering threats to our democracy is a priority for this government, but I have always believed this to be a shared endeavour.

Therefore today, I am directly appealing to every Member of this House, and to colleagues across local government and the devolved governments, to play their part.

Where we see harassment or intimidation, we must act. Where we experience it. We must report it.

I know it can be time consuming but reporting really does matter.

The Parliamentary Security Department works closely with the Home Office and the police to assess threats and put protections in place, but they can only do so with accurate information.

Every report, even if the incident is judged to be below the criminal threshold, helps the authorities build a clearer picture of threat.

So, I urge on all members, if there is an immediate danger, call 999, reference Operation Bridger, and use your SOS fob.

For non-emergency incidents, report them via 101 or online, but again reference Operation Bridger, and inform your Bridger single point of contact.

For metro mayors, local councillors, and police and crime commissioners, reference Operation Ford and this will be picked up by the local force elected official adviser.

Let me be equally clear about our message to those who threaten, intimidate or harass those participating in our democracy, and this applies to individuals and groups alike.

Anonymity is not safety. No one is beyond reach. And whether the offence occurs online or offline, those responsible should expect to be investigated and prosecuted.

Now Mr Speaker, we must challenge at every turn, the notion that abuse, threats and intimidation are now an inevitability for those working in politics and public life.

Across our society we must never become desensitised to rhetoric about harming those who serve in public life; when we hear it in our communities, it should be challenged, not shrugged off as the new normal.

And all of us in this House must also lead by example. Those entrusted with public office set the tone for our national conversation.

If we allow abuse to creep into our exchanges, whether here or on the campaign trail, we risk normalising behaviour that undermines democratic debate.

By leading with civility, even in moments of sharp disagreement, we demonstrate to the country that principled argument can coexist with mutual respect.

Mr Speaker I can inform the House that an extensive programme of work is well under way to ensure the security of the local and the devolved nation elections taking place in May.

This includes support for returning officers to keep polling stations and count centres secure alongside expert guidance on personal and cyber security for candidates.

Mr Speaker, history shows us that our democracy is precious.

So today, together, we should draw a line declaring with one voice that we will not be deterred from serving the public. We will never tolerate abuse, threats and intimidation.

And together we will confront unacceptable behaviour, hold perpetrators to account, and defend our democratic way of life.

And in doing so, we honour the words of Jo Cox, who taught us that we have far more in common than that which divides us.

I commend this statement to the House.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/countering-harassment-and-intimidation-of-elected-representatives>