**The Labour Party Response to the Committee on Standards in Public Life Inquiry into intimidation experienced by Parliamentary Candidates**

1. This submission is made by Jeremy Corbyn MP, the Leader of the Labour Party and the Leader of the Opposition; Ian Lavery MP, the Chair of the Labour Party; and Cat Smith MP, the Shadow Minister for Voter Engagement and Youth Affairs on behalf of the Labour Party.
2. The Labour Party fielded 631 candidates in the General Election on 8th June 2017, with the 262 Labour MPs returned to the House of Commons forming the official Opposition.
3. All political parties will welcome that the recent General Election delivered the most diverse House of Commons in history with a record number of women, LGBT and ethnic minority MPs elected. Although there is more work to do, this is a positive step in making Parliament more representative. We also witnessed increased participation, with half a million more people added to the electoral register, making it the largest electorate for a UK-wide poll.
4. Despite this progress, parliamentary candidates from all political parties have voiced concerns about the unacceptable levels of intimidation they have experienced during election campaigns. Over time, the line between political debate and abuse has blurred and candidates are forced to tolerate abuse from members of the public and in some cases party members. This must be addressed to protect the safety of candidates standing for future elections.
5. The Labour Party welcomes this review by the Committee on Standards in Public Life. Intimidation, including death threats, criminal damage, sexism, racism, homophobia, and anti-Semitism has no place in our democracy or our party. We condemn any action that undermines the integrity of our electoral process and look forward to working with other parties to address this cross-party issue.
6. To inform our response, we invited Labour Members of Parliament and unsuccessful candidates in the 2017 General Election to submit evidence.

**1. Nature of the problem**

1. Unfortunately candidates and public office holders are vulnerable to abuse. The tragic murder of Jo Cox in 2016 and stabbing of Stephen Timms MP in 2010 remind us of the serious threats they face and the longevity of this issue. However, the degree of intimidation experienced varies significantly amongst candidates.

*“People who displayed Labour window posters or signs were targeted (with) hate mail.”* (2017 General Election)

 *“Bullying and intimidation became the norm… including misogyny, "Hijab Shaming", death threats, regular abuse on social media (and) racial and islamophobic attacks.”* (2017 General Election)

*“In previous campaigns we have noted the Tories packing hustings with “growlers” in the front few rows. They were notable by their absence in this campaign.”* (2017 General Election).

 *“I experienced an anti-Semitic attack in the run up to the 2015 General Election campaign by… an organiser for the BNP in the area. It left me shocked and shaken.”*

***Growth of social media***

1. The exponential growth of social media has caused the level of abuse to rise in recent years. Social media platforms have created unprecedented levels of transparency in political discourse and reduced the perceived barrier between the electorate and politicians.
2. However, greater opportunity to communicate online and the application of anonymity has offered new channels for offensive behaviour. In May 2017, The Chartered Institute for IT and Demos published a report which found that over a three month period, MPs received 188,000 abusive tweets.[[1]](#footnote-1) This parallels wider trends. According to Assistant Chief Constable Mark Hamilton, online hate crime has increased significantly over the last 24 to 36 months.[[2]](#footnote-2)
3. Social media platforms like Twitter state "it doesn’t tolerate behaviour that harasses, intimidates or uses fear to silence another person’s voice". However, this is exactly what is happening to many candidates using their platform.

“*Social media bleeds into your 24 hours home life, at night the tweets come in when you're cooking your kids' tea or going to bed. There is little place to hide*.”

***Targeted abuse***

1. Candidates are often targeted because of their gender, sexuality and or ethnicity. This represents a wider context of discrimination that targets individuals on the basis of their different identities.

*“As a transgender person I have suffered social media abuse and death threats since 2005. This election actually had less abuse, perhaps because the trolls had more targets.”*

1. We have particularly concerned about the scale of abuse experienced of women MPs, particularly women who experience multiple forms of oppression. Amnesty International research shows Diane Abbott, the first black woman politician in the UK, received half of all threatening tweets sent to women MPs from January 1st to June 8th this year. The report also found that online abuse cuts across party lines, affecting women from all UK political parties.[[3]](#footnote-3)
2. Abuse causes significant psychological and emotional harm to its victims. Abuse can also pose as a barrier to participation in public life. A BBC Radio Five Live investigation found that a third of female MPs have considered giving up their job as a result. We cannot allow abuse to prevent women and people from minority groups from entering politics and reverse the progress made in making politics more representative.

***A toxic political agenda at home and abroad***

1. This does not happen in a vacuum. The decisions taken by the tabloid press and media to target some politicians fans the flames of hate and validates members of the public to target candidates with intimidation.

 *“In my office we always see, at the very least, a spike in abuse after there has been a lot of negative stuff in the media.”*

1. During the General Election, the Conservatives’ ran a nasty campaign, propagating personal attacks, smears and untruths, particularly aimed at one of the most prominent women MPs, Diane Abbott. The Conservatives perpetrated this on an industrial scale, spending more than a million pounds to post highly personalised attack adverts on voters' Facebook timelines without their permission. This is not an isolated incident. Last year Zac Goldsmith MP ran an extremely divisive and racially discriminatory campaign against Sadiq Khan. It was described by Sayeeda Warsi, the former Conservative Party Co-Chairperson, as “appalling”.
2. In contrast, Labour fought a positive campaign based on policies to transform Britain for the many not the few. We insist that all Labour MPs run positive campaigns based on our policies and the Conservative Party’s record, rather than peddling personal attacks on individuals.
3. The toxic political culture surrounding President Donald Trump has done little for British politics, with far-right US websites helping to drive abuse against members of parliament. We have a responsibility to oppose sexism, racism, homophobia, and anti-Semitism in the strongest terms at home and abroad. While the Labour Party immediately condemned the President’s reckless and irresponsible rhetoric, Theresa May’s record was that of a slow and timid nature.

***Rising security concerns***

1. To some extent the way public office holders interact with the public has changed due to rising security concerns. Some MPs refrain from using social media to communicate with the public to avoid an onslaught of abusive messages. MPs are taking additional safety precautions when holding constituency surgeries and attending in-person events. The availability of parliamentary security packages, like 'lone worker' devices, and the recent creation of The Member Security Support Service team in Parliament are welcome measures.

*“I would never now attend an ‘in-person’ event on my own because of my experience at the 2015 election when I genuinely believed that I could have been subject to a physical assault.”*

1. We must also address the low levels of public trust towards public office holders, which could partly explain the scale of abuse that candidates face. Evidence from The Hansard Society found that overall satisfaction with the way Parliament works now stands at 30 per cent, six points lower than in 2004.[[4]](#footnote-4)

*“The public start from the premise that you are a liar and (are) not to be trusted - this seems to give (the public) licence to behave in a way they would not do so to people they respect.”*

***Complex legislative framework***

1. Existing legislation, such as Section 127 of the Communications Act and the the Malicious Communications Act, can be used to deal with internet trolls, cyber-stalking and harassment. However, the law is often underused or misunderstood due to its complex legislative framework,[[5]](#footnote-5) in particular the undue influence offence which is poorly expressed in legislation.[[6]](#footnote-6)
2. The law is failing to protect candidates from becoming victims of stalking. Unlike parliamentary candidates, those standing for local elections are required to disclose their home or office addresses on ballot papers.

“I have been the victim of harassment as a result of having to disclose my home address on multiple public documents…. It’s horrible and invasive and intimidating… especially since Jo Cox's murder.”

***Lack of resources***

1. After reporting online abuse to their local police, many candidates found investigations were cut short due to limited resources. We cannot ignore the growing crisis the police face. This Government has cut over 20,000 police officers and cuts have consequences. Police forces are over-stretched and this leads to pressure to downgrade crimes, or not fully investigate them.

***Lack of data***

1. The Government does not hold specific data relating to electoral campaigns, despite candidates facing abuse over many years. The police record hate crimes, monitor community tensions and communicate electoral data. However, monitoring and reporting racism during elections on a national scale has fallen to the third sector.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**2. Responsibility to take action**

***Social media***

1. Social media platforms have a responsibility to respect human rights, ensure that candidates using the platform are able to express themselves freely and without fear, and act faster to prevent and remove abuse online.
2. Twitter must enforce its own policies on hateful conduct and invest more resources to enforce reporting mechanisms for users. Instagram has started to crack down on trolls who post sexist and racist abuse by automatically blocking abusive comments before they are seen by other users.[[8]](#footnote-8) We urge other platforms to follow this example and pursue other proactive measures.

***Government***

1. Government has an obligation to protect candidates from abuse. To understand this problem, it is vital that Government collects and analyses election-related racism and discrimination data.
2. To prevent targeted abuse from taking place, changes to electoral law are necessary to allow candidates standing in local elections to choose whether or not their home address appears on the ballot paper.
3. To enable the police to tackle intimidation during election campaigns, we urge the the government to stop cutting core police budgets and give the police the resources they need.
4. It is also vital that we have robust legislation in place. The Labour Party supports the recommendation put forward by the Law Commission that electoral offences be redrafted, believing that simpler, more modern provisions would secure greater compliance among campaigners, the public, the police, and prosecution services. We also support the Law Commission’s proposal to review the law on ‘undue influence’, making the offence more readily understood and enforced.[[9]](#footnote-9)

***Political parties***

1. The Labour Party is built on equality, social justice and compassion. Parties have a responsibility to treat others with dignity and respect, including those with whom we strongly disagree. We stand against all forms of abuse and will take action against those who commit it.
2. Our Governance and Legal Unit take complaints about our members and abusive behaviour towards others with the utmost seriousness. To ensure that Labour members comply with the high standards expected by our party, our internal procedures for dealing with abuse and intimidation were reviewed and improved following the Shami Chakrabarti report into anti-Semitism.
3. In September 2016 The NEC passed a Social Media Policy (see Appendix) which outlines the expectation of all our members to treat people with dignity and respect. The Labour Party have a close relationship with Facebook and Twitter and escalates abuse directly to them. Training is also provided for MPs in social media best practise, which includes community management and best practise on how to deal with abuse and trolling.
4. Parties must take responsibility for their actions and commit to ensure such vitriolic abuse is never repeated. The Labour Party therefore supports the proposal put forward by the All-Party parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism for political parties and their leaders to agree a joint code of conduct with a framework for reporting, assessing, and disciplining discrimination, racism and other forms of electoral abuse.

**Conclusion**

1. The Labour condemns all acts of intimidation towards candidates. This is an issue experienced by all political parties and must be address to protect individual safety and the integrity of our election process. We cannot let the actions of a small number of individuals, however violent and extreme they are, drive a wedge between MPs and their constituents and reverse the progress made in making Parliament more representative.
2. The growth of social media has caused the level of abuse towards candidates to rise in recent years. Platforms must act faster to prevent and remove abusive behaviour online. However political parties and the mainstream media must treat others with dignity and respect. We look forward to working with others to address this cross-party issue.

**Jeremy Corbyn MP**

**Leader of the Labour Party and Leader of the Opposition**

**Ian Lavery MP**

**Chair of the Labour Party**

**Cat Smith MP**

**Shadow Minister for Voter Engagement and Youth Affairs**

**Appendix**

**1. Labour Party Member’s Pledge**

I pledge to act within the spirit and rules of the Labour Party in my conduct both on and offline, with members and non-members and I stand against all forms of abuse.

I understand that if found to be in breach of the Labour Party policy on online and offline abuse, I will be subject to the rules and procedures of the Labour Party.

**2. Labour Party Social Media Policy**

Social Media Policy - National Executive Committee Statement

A starting point for all our actions as members of a party and a movement is to treat all people with dignity and respect. This applies to all our dealings with people, offline and online.

Everyone should feel able to take part in discussion about our party, country and world. We want to maximise this debate, including critical discussion, as long as it does not result in the exclusion of others.

Abusing someone online is just as serious as doing so face to face. We stand against all forms of abuse and will take action against those who commit it.

Harassment, intimidation, hateful language and bullying are never acceptable, nor is any form of discrimination on the basis of gender, race, religion, age, sexual orientation, gender identity or disability.

Any member found in breach of the above policies will be dealt with according to the rules and procedures of the Labour Party.

We wish to build a diverse movement that reflects the whole of society, so should always consider how our actions and words may limit the confidence or otherwise exclude either those less knowledgeable than ourselves or those already under-represented in politics.

Those with privilege, whether due to their volume of experience, party position or status in society should have regard to how their actions may be felt by those in different circumstances to themselves.

It is perfectly possible to have vehement disagreements without descending into personal abuse, shaming people or exhibiting bullying behaviour. Forcefully made points and criticisms of the political views of others are totally legitimate, personal attacks are not.

Debates amongst party members should be comradely, acknowledging that whatever our diverse views, we are one party with shared goals. Derogatory descriptions of the positions of others should be avoided.

Anonymous accounts or otherwise hiding ones identity for the purpose of abusing others is never permissible.

The use of sexualised language or imagery, and unwelcome sexual attention or advances are not acceptable, nor is the publishing of others’ private information without their explicit permission.

We should not give voice to those who persistently engage in abuse and should avoid sharing their content, even when the item in question is unproblematic. Those who consistently abuse other or spread hate should be shunned and not engaged with in a way that ignores this behaviour.

We all have a responsibility to challenge abuse and to stand in solidarity with victims of it. We should attempt to educate and discourage abusers rather than responding in kind.

We encourage the reporting of abusive behaviour to the Labour Party, administrators of the relevant website or social media platform, and where appropriate, to the police. This is a collective responsibility and should not be limited to those who have been subjected to abuse.

Trolling, or otherwise disrupting the ability of others to debate is not acceptable, nor is consistently mentioning or making contact with others when this is unwelcome.

**Principles for the Labour Party’s use of Social Media**

1. We are direct, confident and proud in what we have to say - we speak boldly and with clear intention.
2. We are clear about our position and our policies, and will give our members and supporters the language and tools to disseminate these.
3. Collectivism is at the heart of what we do. Our members and supporters are crucial to all our achievements and their contributions, from door-knocking to online activism, are valued and acknowledged.
4. We seek to break down the wall that creates ‘us’ and ‘them’. When we say ‘we’ that means the whole movement and those who share our values, not an exclusive group.
5. We want debate and discussion to flourish on our channels and will encourage feedback wherever appropriate.
6. We make legitimate criticisms based on policy and political actions, never making personal attacks.
7. We use accessible language and avoid jargon that could exclude or alienate.
8. We put the stories and experiences of the public first. We prioritise the issues that affect people in their everyday lives, rather than providing news for insiders.
9. We are inventive and innovative with our digital strategy and that means experimentation. We need people to be open-minded to change and encourage us to offer the best digital experience possible - even when that means trial and error.
10. We know that not everyone will agree with us. Constructive criticism is welcome, but we want to create a welcoming space for our supporters, so if comments become abusive we will report them.
1. Alex Krasodomski-Jones, A., *Signal and Noise. Can technology provide a window into the new world of digital politics in the UK?* p.27 (2017). <https://www.demos.co.uk/project/signal-and-noise/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. House of Commons Home Affairs Committee (HC) *Hate crime: abuse, hate and extremism online Fourteenth Report of Session 2016–17* <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmhaff/609/60904.htm#_idTextAnchor006> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.newstatesman.com/2017/09/we-tracked-25688-abusive-tweets-sent-women-mps-half-were-directed-diane-abbott> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hansard Society, *Audit of Political Engagement 14 The 2017 Report*, <https://assets.contentful.com/xkbace0jm9pp/1vNBTsOEiYciKEAqWAmEKi/c9cc36b98f60328c0327e313ab37ae0c/Audit_of_political_Engagement_14__2017_.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The All-Party Parliamentary Group Against Antisemitism, *All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry Into Electoral Conduct Final Update*, July 2017 London <https://files.graph.cool/cj3e6rg8y906h0104uh8bojao/cj4sjq5ig01ii0111biq3f3ft> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Law Commission, Electoral Law An Interim Report, 4 February 2016, p.162 <http://www.lawcom.gov.uk/app/uploads/2016/02/electoral_law_interim_report.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The All-Party Parliamentary Group Against Antisemitism, *All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry Into Electoral Conduct Final Update*, July 2017 London, p.12. <https://files.graph.cool/cj3e6rg8y906h0104uh8bojao/cj4sjq5ig01ii0111biq3f3ft> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Telegraph, *Instagram cracks down on trolls by hiding abusive comments from users*, 29 June 2017 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/2017/06/29/instagram-cracks-trolls-hiding-sexist-comments-users/> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Law Commission, Electoral Law An Interim Report, 4 February 2016, p.165 <http://www.lawcom.gov.uk/app/uploads/2016/02/electoral_law_interim_report.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)