

## **Bullying in the House of Commons**

Recently bullying in the workplace has reached the headlines again. It has also been a subject for discussion on the airwaves. On Friday 21<sup>st</sup> August, Ann Widdecombe tackled the issue for LBC, inviting listeners to call in with comments, and details of their experiences.

Miss Widdecombe was an attentive and sympathetic listener, but was dismissive of a report suggesting that MPs too were subjected to bullying. It would appear that Miss Widdecombe thinks that MPs should be made of sterner stuff. They should be impervious to behaviours that would be interpreted as bullying in any other occupation. The reasoning applied was that the nature of an MP's work is to represent and stand up for constituents. In order to do this effectively Miss Widdecombe argues that the MP should first be able to stand up for him/herself. According to her this means that they should be resilient enough to withstand any onslaught from colleagues or the party leadership. This attitude is worrying on two counts: a) it takes as a given that bullied individuals are weak; and b) it suggests that yet again it should be acceptable for Parliamentary Members to operate outside the behavioural standards expected in our society.

Let me first explode the urban myth that bullied individuals are weak. In fact anyone can become the target of bullying. Targets are rarely weak and incompetent individuals, although over time the process may well demoralise them and affect their levels of confidence and self esteem. Often their only mistake is standing out in some way, at the wrong time, and in the wrong place.

Now, on to the second point: Parliament as an exceptional workplace where the normal rules of personal interactions do not apply. If this is based on the assumption that the objective of anti-bullying measures is to restrict debate or confrontation, it is erroneous. They are actually aimed at the way in which such encounters are constructed. It should not be acceptable to abuse power, to threaten or to humiliate any individual in the workplace, and this should include our elected representatives. This also applies to other high risk, high power or high remuneration occupations where there is a working culture that embraces notions of exclusivity and exceptional

conditions. Military, policing, investment banking, cooking: all can be acquitted effectively without recourse to unjustifiable negative behaviour. Soldiers, officers, bankers and chefs are paid to work not to expend energy defending themselves against the indefensible action of bullying. Courts Martial and Employment Tribunals findings and awards would attest to this fact.

Even if the organisational culture renders it acceptable, bullying should never be used as a management tool. It does not extract the best efforts from people. More commonly it transfixes them, suppressing creative contributions, and creating an oppressive, stressful and unhealthy working environment.

If some MPs have stated that they feel bullied, the reaction of the House should not be one of dismissal, but of concern. If it is not to appear hypocritical, perhaps this might be the time for Parliament to reflect on its own standards of behaviour. After all, how can it set laws and standards for the rest of us without first putting its own House in order?