

**House of Commons**

House of Commons culture of bullying and harassment starts with senior officials - inquiry

Report says necessary changes seem unlikely under current senior House administration

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Parliament's culture of bullying and harassment will not change until the departure of senior **House of Commons** officials, a damning inquiry commissioned in the wake of bullying allegations against the Speaker, John Bercow, has claimed.

The independent report by Dame Laura Cox said there was a tradition of "deference and silence" that "actively sought to cover up abusive conduct" and gave no protection to those reporting bullying or sexual harassment.

Cox, a QC who served as a judge until she retired in 2016, was not tasked with responding to individual complaints, including those against Bercow, which he denies.

However, she concluded “the levers of change are regarded as part of the change that is needed” and that individuals should consider their positions.

“When reading this report some people may privately recognise their own behaviours in some of the alleged abusive conduct I have described,” she said. “I would hope that a process of reflection leads them to consider what, if anything, they should now do in the best interests of the House.”

In the 155-page report, Cox quoted several anonymous contributors who said it would take “several generations” for meaningful change to be enacted.

“On this basis, I find it difficult to envisage how the necessary changes can be successfully delivered, and the confidence of the staff restored, under the current senior House administration,” she said.

She said the terms of reference of the report, which have been criticised by the civil service trade union, made her unable to name the individuals against whom “serious allegations of abusive conduct” had been made, sometimes by multiple complainants. There were a number of individuals who were “regarded as bearing some personal responsibility for the criticisms made” of the workplace culture, she added.

Cox said their “continued presence is viewed as unlikely to facilitate the necessary changes” but said it would be wrong of her to name those people.

However, she said her definition of senior leadership included the Speaker’s office, the clerk of the House, the director general, the executive board and House of Commons commission.

“Some individuals will want to think very carefully about whether they are the right people to press the reset button and to do what is required to deliver that change in the best interests of the House, having regard both to its reputation and its role as an employer of those who are rightly regarded as its most important resource.”

The report also said the “collective reputation” of MPs was being damaged by the allegations against a small number. “I have no doubt that they will regard this as intolerable,” she said, urging MPs to give “active support” to efforts to change the system.

As well as bullying allegations, Cox said she had found disturbing reports of sexual harassment by current and former MPs towards female staff, including:

- Comments about their appearance, their dress or their “physical attributes”
- Being the butt of jokes between MPs, in their presence and often in front of others
- Frequent inappropriate touching, including men patting women’s heads, putting their arms around women, leaving a hand on their knee for an uncomfortably long time, trying to kiss them, grabbing their arms or bottoms or stroking their breasts or bottoms

- Women being abused in vulgar, gender-related terms if they failed to do something that had been requested
- Women being repeatedly propositioned; and similar allegations from some men.

Cox recommended the new independent complaints and grievance scheme should be amended to ensure employees with historical complaints can access the scheme and that MPs should play no part in determining complaints of bullying, harassment or sexual harassment brought by House staff against other MPs.

The former judge said many of the complaints she had heard during the course of her inquiry were “disturbing” and that staff “were not people set on revenge or out to malign either individuals or the reputation of the House itself”.

Among current and former staff there is “an obvious pride and affection for the House and its status”, she said. “But that sense of loyalty has been tested to breaking point by a culture, cascading from the top down, of deference, subservience, acquiescence and silence, in which bullying, harassment and sexual harassment have been able to thrive and have long been tolerated and concealed.”

The investigation was announced by Andrea Leadsom in March to examine the nature and extent of bullying and harassment in parliament, including how complaints have been handled, and how procedures can be improved. Staff and former staff were invited to submit their experiences confidentially in person or in writing.

The investigation was prompted by a BBC Newsnight investigation into bullying claims made against Bercow. Bercow has emphatically denied allegations that he **bullied his former private secretaries** Angus Sinclair and Kate Emms.

Sinclair told BBC’s Newsnight that Bercow undermined him in front of other staff, shouted, swore and attempted to physically intimidate him.

His successor, Emms, served as Bercow’s private secretary from May 2010 to February 2011. Newsnight reported Bercow frequently shouted at her and she was subsequently diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

David Leakey, who stepped down last year as Black Rod, **a ceremonial post in parliament**, told Newsnight he had experienced the outbursts of temper described by other former members of Bercow’s staff.

Bercow, who has been Speaker since 2009, said before he took the post he would resign after no longer than nine years, meaning 22 June of this year would be his departure date. However, he has signalled he may stay in the post for another year, after he was re-elected in 2017 due to the snap election.

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