

Report 02-19 to the Assembly under Standing Order 22.9

September 2019



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Standards of Conduct Committee
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Report 02-19 to the Assembly under Standing Order 22.9

September 2019



About the Committee

The Committee was established on 28 June 2016. Its remit can be found at:
www.assembly.wales/SeneddStandards

Committee Chair:



Jayne Bryant AM
Welsh Labour
Newport West

Current Committee membership:



Andrew RT Davies AM
Welsh Conservatives
South Wales Central



Helen Mary Jones AM
Plaid Cymru
Mid and West Wales



David J Rowlands AM
Brexit Party
South Wales East

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Recommendations

Recommendation 1. The Committee recommends to the Assembly, in accordance with 7.12(iv) of the Procedure for Dealing with Complaints against Assembly Members, that a breach has been found and that the Member should be censured under Standing Order 22.10.....Page 9

1. Introduction

1. The terms of reference of the Standards of Conduct Committee (the Committee) are set out in Standing Order 22.¹ In accordance with functions set out in Standing Order 22.2 the Committee must:

“investigate, report on and, if appropriate, recommend action in respect of any complaint referred to it by the Commissioner for Standards.”²

2. This report is made to the Assembly under Standing Order 22.9 and paragraph 8.1 of the Procedure for Dealing with Complaints against Assembly Members³ (the Procedure), in relation to a complaint made against Leanne Wood AM.

3. The report from the Commissioner for Standards (the Commissioner) on his investigation of the complaint is attached at Annex A. It sets out the details of the complaint and the findings of the Commissioner’s formal investigation.

4. This report sets out the details of the complaint and the way in which the Committee arrived at its recommendation.

¹ Standing Orders

² Standing Order 22.2(i)

³ The National Assembly for Wales’ Procedure for Dealing with Complaints Against Assembly Members

2. Consideration of the Complaint

5. The complaint alleged that the Member concerned failed to comply with paragraphs 4 (b) and 4 (g), which state:

“Paragraph 4(b) – Integrity: Holders of public office should not place themselves under any financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organisations that might influence them in the performance of their official duties.

Assembly Members should at all times conduct themselves in a manner which will tend to maintain and strengthen the public’s trust and confidence in the integrity of the Assembly and refrain from any action which would bring the Assembly, or its members generally, into disrepute. Members should not ask Assembly Commission or Welsh Government staff to act in any way which would compromise the political impartiality of the Civil Service and/or Assembly Commission staff or conflict with the Civil Service Code and/or the Assembly Commission Staff Code of Conduct.”

“Paragraph 4(g) – Leadership: Holders of public office should promote and support these principles by leadership and example.”⁴

6. The Commissioner also considered the complaint in the light of the Assembly’s Dignity and Respect Policy, which was passed on 16 May 2018 and requires everyone who works in the National Assembly for Wales to have a high degree of respect for the dignity of others.

7. The complaint alleged that the Member breached the Code of Conduct for Assembly Members by referring to an author of a tweet regarding a fellow AM as “an arsehole”.

8. In her written correspondence with the Commissioner, Ms Wood took full responsibility for drafting and posting the tweet. She contextualised the response to the tweet by explaining:

“...The originator had been a persistent, pernicious influence in Welsh politics for many years. His blogs often contain disparaging comments about women and minorities as well as Plaid Cymru; which are seemingly his pet hates. I defend freedom of speech but there are

⁴ Code of Conduct

limits to this and Jones frequently crosses the line and regularly writes untruths.”

9. Leanne Wood submitted supporting documents to the Committee:

- A Statement from Welsh Women’s Aid (Annex B)
- A Statement from Glitch, a not-for-profit organisation campaigning to end online abuse (Annex B)

10. The Committee received oral evidence from Leanne Wood AM on 25 June 2019 in accordance with the provision in the Procedure for Dealing with Complaints against Assembly Members.

11. During the evidence session, Leanne Wood AM set out further background context to the incident which led to the complaint.

12. The Committee noted the statement from Leanne Wood AM and reflected that the Member could have handled the tweet in a number of ways and should not have used this language on a social media platform.

13. The Committee met on Tuesday 18 June, Tuesday 25 June and Tuesday 2 July 2019 to consider and reach its conclusion in respect of this complaint.

Committee’s Consideration of its Decision

14. The Committee considered whether the Member was in breach of Standing Order 22.2(i).⁵

15. In considering whether a breach took place the Committee reviewed the information within the Commissioner’s report and the Commissioner’s opinion that a breach had taken place alongside the written and oral representations from Leanne Wood AM.

16. The Committee noted that the Member has stated that while she does not normally use unparliamentary language on social media she does reserve the right to deal with online bullies robustly.

17. The Committee appreciates the context around the tweet with regards to the pattern of previous tweets. The Committee also noted the timeframe in which this event occurred – namely shortly after the death of Steffan Lewis AM, and just

⁵ Standing order 22.2(i)

before Delyth Jewell was due to take office as an Assembly Member for South East Wales – although Leanne Wood did not explicitly reference this.

18. We agree with the statement in the Women’s aid written evidence submitted by Leanne Wood that:

“We also know that abusers can be expert manipulators and controllers, and abusive men know that to trigger a response from women, they don’t always have to be explicitly abusive. All they need to do is add to the drip-drip-drip cacophony of negative criticisms and put-downs against women, to instigate resistance or an active bystander response, which they can then use against her to bring her down.”⁶

19. The Committee strongly believe that any form of online abuse should be tackled and that we all have a responsibility to be active bystanders with regards to this type of behaviour. However, we believe that the appropriate response to dealing with this, is not using language which some people may find offensive. As elected politicians, it is incumbent on us to hold ourselves to as high a standard as possible.

Having reviewed the report from the Commissioner for Standards the Committee finds that a breach of the Code of Conduct has taken place by Leanne Wood AM in relation to paragraphs 4 (b) and 4(g) of the Code of Conduct and the Dignity and Respect Policy.

Committee’s Recommendation – Sanctions available.

20. The Committee considers that a breach by any Assembly Member is a serious matter. The reputation of the National Assembly for Wales as an institution, and the public’s trust and confidence in it, rely upon Members demonstrating integrity and leadership by their actions.

21. The Committee believes that in this instance it would be appropriate for the Member concerned to recognise that the use of such language on a public platform is not appropriate and apologise to the Assembly for bringing it into disrepute.

Recommendation 1. The Committee recommends to the Assembly, in accordance with 7.12(iv) of the Procedure for Dealing with Complaints against

⁶ Written Evidence, Annex B

Assembly Members, that a breach has been found and that the Member should be censured under Standing Order 22.10

22. A copy of this report has been provided to the Member concerned, who was also notified of her right to appeal under section 8 of the procedure.⁷

23. The Committee Chair has tabled a motion (in accordance with Standing Order 22.11 and paragraph 9.1 of the procedure) calling on the Assembly to endorse the Committee's recommendation.

Other matters arising from this complaint

24. The Assembly Commission undertook a dignity and respect survey of all Commission staff, AMs and Assembly Members Support Staff, this found that people on the Assembly estate had had experience of unacceptable behaviour including offensive comments. We all need to be minded of how we communicate with each other and the potential impact this might have on others.

25. The Committee notes that the Commissioner for Standards has received other complaints arising from postings by Assembly Members on social media platforms. The Commissioner believes that there needs to be a more explicit link between what is acceptable on social media and the Code of Conduct. The Committee has already indicated to take this forward as part of our wider work on implementing the dignity and respect agenda set out in our report "Creating the Right Culture".

26. In this instance the Committee decided that a censure was the most appropriate of the available sanctions.

27. However, the Committee believes it would benefit from having a wider range of sanctions available. For example, it may have been appropriate in this instance to require the Member to attend training on how to deal with abuse online.

⁷ The National Assembly for Wales' Procedure for Dealing with Complaints Against Assembly Members

Annex B: Report from the Commissioner for Standards

From: Sir Roderick Evans, Commissioner for Standards

To: Standards of Conduct Committee

FORMAL INVESTIGATION REPORT

Leanne Wood AM

The Complainant

1. On 21st January 2019 I received a complaint from a member of the public about a message posted by Leanne Wood AM on Twitter. The complaint contained the name, address and contact details of the complainant and my office has successfully used those contact details to correspond with the complainant. I am satisfied, therefore, that this is not an anonymous complaint. The complainant, however, does not want his name publicised and as this is not a complaint which requires the identity of the complainant to be revealed to properly carry out an investigation into it, I have not informed Ms Wood of the complainant's identity. She accepts the appropriateness of my not doing so. Similarly, I shall not name the complainant in this report.

The Background

2. Following the death on 11th January 2019 of Plaid Cymru Regional Member for South Wales East, Steffan Lewis, Ms Delyth Jewell was confirmed as his successor. A blogger and political commentator who uses the name "Jac O' The North" posted a message on Twitter at 16.49 on 16th January sharing, without comment, news of Ms Jewell's confirmation as a Member of the Assembly.
3. At 17.15 that day Jac O' The North posted a further message which read:
"Women's rights and international development'. God help @Plaid Cymru."
"Women's rights" and "international development" appear to be references to Ms Jewell's stated areas of particular interest.
4. At 21.37 Ms Wood shared Jac O' The North's tweet and comment and added her own comment to Jac O' The North. This read:
"Do you have to be an arsehole all the time? Have a day off."
5. At 22.20 that evening Jac O' The North tweeted in response:
"As you know, I've never been an admirer of yours, but even so, this is disappointing."

6. Copies of the relevant tweets are set out in Attachment 1

The Complaint

7. In his letter of complaint (Attachment 2, from which I have redacted the complainant's name and contact details) the complainant complains that Ms Wood breached the Code of Conduct for Assembly Members by referring to Jac O' The North as "an arsehole". He states that Ms Wood's posting was in response to a bland sceptical comment from Jac O' The North which she could have dealt with in a number of different ways – a brief factual and perhaps witty response or, alternatively, she could have ignored the comment and left it to Ms Jewell to respond. Instead, he says, "she dropped to the lowest common denominator" and the "excessively strong wording used by Ms Wood must be challenged before it becomes common currency among our elected public figures".

The Investigation

8. On 25th January I wrote to Ms Wood seeking her confirmation that she was responsible for the tweet, the subject of the complaint, and, if she was, to ask for an explanation of why, in light of the Code of Conduct and the Dignity and Respect Policy, she considered it appropriate for a Member of the Assembly to abuse a member of the public, who is also a political blogger/commentator, by calling him an "arsehole" in a public forum. (Attachment 3)
9. By letter dated 31st January (Attachment 4) Ms Wood confirmed that she was responsible for the tweet and sought to give context to it. She said that Jac O' The North, whom she identified as Royston Jones, had been "a persistent, pernicious influence in Welsh politics for many years. His blogs often contain disparaging comments about women and minorities as well as Plaid Cymru; which are seemingly his pet hates. I defend freedom of speech but there are limits to this and Jones frequently crosses the line and regularly writes untruths".
10. Ms Wood then set out in her letter tweets by Jac O' The North which were intended to justify her view of him and she concluded by saying:

"When I responded to the tweet in question it was with a determination to stand up to what I saw as another case of bullying and intimidation of a young woman entering politics.

"I don't regret using the only type of language that someone like Jones understands. His tweet warranted a strong and direct response and I provided that. This was done in the spirit of Selflessness in the Code of Conduct as I took the decision in the public interest. I would also argue that i did not bring the Assembly into disrepute by standing up to an infamous bully in the manner I did."
11. On 5th February (Attachment 5) I wrote to Ms Wood stating that I was sensitive to the fact that women in public life are sometimes subjected to wholly unacceptable threats and abuse and that I was aware that she, herself, had been subjected to such behaviour.

However, I pointed out that in the tweets which led up to her comment Jac O' The North had not attacked anyone – neither her nor Ms Jewell; his comment was directed only at Ms Jewell's stated political interests and their impact on Plaid Cymru. Whether one agreed with Jac O' The North's views on this matter or not, they were views which a political commentator/blogger was entitled to hold and express. I informed her that the complaint against her was admissible and that I was, accordingly, moving to the formal investigation stage.

12. On 12th February, Ms Wood responded (Attachment 6) expressing her disappointment at my letter of 5th February and saying that she had hoped that I would have been able to see what she referred to as “misogynistic bullying” for what it was and that I would have understood her robust response to it. She described Jac O' The North as “abusive and obnoxious” and deserving of “strong challenge” and confirmed her determination to stand up to “on-line bullies”.
13. On 19th March I interviewed Ms Wood about this complaint following which she provided me with a statement. (Attachment 7)

Facts found by the Commissioner

14. Ms Wood posted the tweet about which complaint is made.

Conclusions

15. On-line bullying is a growing problem both in society generally and in political life. Furthermore, there is evidence that women in public/political life are particularly subject to online threats, bullying and vilification and I accept Ms Wood's point that such conduct must be challenged and robustly dealt with. However, Assembly Members when using social media, including when challenging its inappropriate content, must ensure that they do so in a way which is consistent with the high standards of conduct expected of them as outlined in the Code of Conduct.
16. I make no comment and come to no conclusion on whether Ms Wood's description of Jac O' The North/Royston Jones - “abusive”, “obnoxious”, “misogynistic bully”, “persistent, pernicious influence in Welsh politics” – is justified or not as to do so would be outside the scope of this complaint and of my investigation. However, the posting which triggered Ms Wood's tweet was a comment on Ms Jewell's policy interests, and whether one agrees with it or not, it was a comment which any member of the public – let alone a political commentator/blogger – was entitled to make.
17. However, even accepting for present purposes Ms Wood's assertion that Jac O' The North's comment was misogynistic bullying and an attempt to undermine Ms Jewell, descending to vulgar abuse of a political commentator/blogger on a social media platform is not the way an Assembly Member should respond robustly to such conduct.

18. I reject Ms Wood’s argument that calling Jac O’ The North “an arsehole” was consistent with the spirit of selflessness required by the seven general principles of conduct identified by the Committee on Standards in Public Life and that her decision to do so was taken in the public interest. Jac O’ The North’s posting could have been appropriately responded to and challenged in a number of ways, some of which were identified by the complainant. In my view, none of them required the use of a vulgar abusive term by an Assembly Member.
19. The seven general principles of conduct in public life set out in paragraph 4 of the Code of Conduct for Assembly Members require Members to conduct themselves at all times in a manner which will tend to maintain and strengthen the public’s trust and confidence in the integrity of the Assembly and to refrain from any action which would bring the Assembly... into disrepute. (para. 4b) Members should promote and support these principles by leadership and example. (para 4g) By abusing Jac O’ The North/Royston Jones in the way that she did Ms Wood has brought the Assembly into disrepute and failed to show leadership in the way that on-line political debate should be conducted in Wales.
20. The Dignity and Respect Policy adopted by the National Assembly requires everyone who works at the National Assembly for Wales to show a high degree of respect for the dignity of others. A Member of the Assembly calling a member of the public “an arsehole” on a social media platform is a clear breach of this policy.
21. I, therefore, conclude that Ms Wood is in breach of the Code of Conduct and of the Assembly’s Dignity and Respect Policy and that she falls to be dealt with by the Committee on Standards of Conduct under Standing Order 22.2.

Requirements under the Procedure for Dealing with Complaints

22. This complaint, of itself, raises no issue of general principle. However, this is by no means the only complaint I have received arising from postings by Assembly Members on social media platforms. It would not be appropriate to detail other matters in this report but suffice it to say that the Committee’s belief that there needs to be a more explicit link between what is acceptable on social media and the Code of Conduct (see: Creating the Right Culture para. 70) is, in my view, justified.
23. I confirm that the complainant and the Member concerned have been provided with a draft of this report and given an opportunity to comment on its factual accuracy. Neither identified a factual inaccuracy contained in it.

Attachments

24. I attach to this report the following documents:
 - (i) Copy of postings on Twitter

- (ii) Letter of complaint dated 19th January 2019, redacted as described above
- (iii) Letter dated 25th January 2019 from me to Ms Wood
- (iv) Letter dated 31st January 2019 from Ms Wood to me (redacted at Ms Wood's request to remove references to and images of third parties to avoid the possibility of embarrassing those third parties.)
- (v) Letter dated 5th February 2019 from me to Ms Wood
- (vi) Letter dated 12th February 2019 from Ms Wood to me
- (vii) Statement of Ms Wood dated 12 March 2019

Sir Roderick Evans

13 June 2019



LeanneWood  
@LeanneWood

Follow



Do you have to be an asshole all the time?
Have a day off.



Jac o' the North @JacotheNorth
Replying to @EinGwlad @WalesPolitics

8,925 Tweets 1,143 Retweets 1,225 Likes

'Women's rights and international development'. God help @Plaid_Cymru

9:37 PM - 16 Jan 2019

313 Retweets 2,396 Likes



 103  313  2.4K 



Tweet your reply



Jac o' the North @JacotheNorth · Jan 16



Replying to @LeanneWood

As you know, I've never been an admirer of yours, but even so, this is disappointing.

 20  3  17 



19th January 2019

**Attention of the Commissioner for Standards
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
CF99 1NA**

Dear Sir

Complaint regarding the conduct of an elected member of the Assembly.

Earlier this week my attention was drawn to a brief statement made by a member, Leanne Wood A.M, in the form of a response to an earlier set of remarks made by another person on his Twitter account, @JacotheNorth. As I said the remark was brief and quite pointed. In it Ms Wood described the other party as “an arsehole”. The comment in full read :

“Do you have to be an arsehole all the time ? Have a day off.”

It was made in response to a bland sceptical comment from the other party concerning the nomination of a Ms Delyth Jewell as a successor to the late Steffan Lewis, Ms Jewell was apparently next on the regional list.

This in turn has sparked a stream of like minded abuse which can be arguably attributed to Ms Wood’s initial comment as most are said to have arisen **after** her comment. For example I have had forwarded an equally abusive follow-up from a Mark Phillips, a senior Plaid Cymru office holder, who bluntly pronounced the recipient as “Neanderthal prick” ! As I do not directly subscribe to the Twitter service, or whatever it calls itself, I have been unable to gather copies of the other remarks. I am assured by a third party that they do not make good reading, but probably reflect what is becoming the normal standard of conduct among some users on platforms like Twitter.

What is now known is that Ms Wood has a large following on this Twitter medium, some 58000 according to my sources, representing strongly held opinions across a spectrum of feminist, transgender rights, third sector, nationalist and EU Remainer interest groups. Her opinions and attitudes appear to influence and find favour with many others who are in turn influencers within their own interest communities or circles. It follows that her prejudice is one that will be transmitted to these other communities and may prove damaging to the reputation of the much-read JacotheNorthblog which has attracted interest from many who do not share his views alongside those who do.

My point in all this is that while these comments from other largely anonymous people are quite offensive, they are people who do not serve as members in our National Assembly or any other

representative body, as far as I know. Serving members have a code of conduct for good reasons, and you have greater familiarity than me or any other complainants with the significance and obligations of the code.

I write with a conviction that Ms Wood has a case to answer. She could have dealt easily with the remarks submitted by the other party, JacotheNorth, with a brief factual, and perhaps witty response. Or, she could have ignored them and left it to Ms Jewell to respond. Instead she dropped to the lowest common denominator and in my opinion acted in breach of your code. That excessively strong wording used by Ms Wood must be challenged before it becomes common currency among our elected public figures.

I leave it to you to decide how this matter is best dealt with as it rests within your remit.

I look forward to your response. If you require additional information I will endeavour to retrieve it.

Yours sincerely

A solid black rectangular redaction box covering the signature area.

Leanne Wood AM
Tŷ Hywel
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff
CF99 1NA

25th January 2019

Dear Ms Wood,

I have received a complaint from a member of the public about a remark you posted on Twitter on 16th January. Your remark was directed at Jac O' The North.

At 4.49pm that day Jac O' The North posted an article on twitter about Delyth Jewell's joining the Assembly. He did so without comment. At 5.15pm he repeated the posting this time with the comment "Women's rights and international development'. God help Plaid Cymru." At 9.37pm you responded by tweeting "Do you have to be an arsehole all the time? Have a day off" and it is that which is the subject of the complaint.

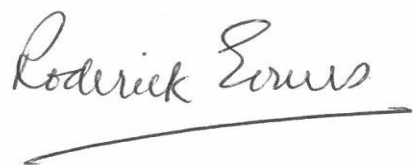
I write to seek your confirmation that you were responsible for the tweet and to ask for an explanation of why you consider it is appropriate for a Member of the Assembly to abuse a member of the public, who is also a political blogger/commentator, by calling him an "arsehole" in a public forum. I should be grateful if you would consider your response in the context of the Code of Conduct for Assembly Members, in particular the requirement in paragraph 4b that Members refrain from any action which would bring the Assembly ... into disrepute, and the Dignity and Respect Policy adopted by the Assembly.

Y Pierhead
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—
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E-bost: Comisiynydd.Safonau@cynulliad.cymru
—
Croesewir gohebiaeth yn y Gymraeg a'r Saesneg

Pierhead
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
CF99 1NA
—
Tel: 0300 200 6539
Email: Standards.Commissioner@assembly.wales
—
We welcome correspondence in both English and Welsh

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Roderick Evans". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal stroke.

Sir Roderick Evans
Y Comisiynydd Safonau
Standards Commissioner



Leanne Wood AC/AM

Aelod Cynulliad dros y Rhondda
Assembly Member for the Rhondda

Sir Roderick Evans
Standards Commissioner
Pierhead
Cardiff
CF99 1NA

31 January 2019

Dear Roderick,

I write in response to your letter of 25th January 2019. I can confirm that I was responsible for the tweet that was sent to Royston Jones who goes by the pseudonym Jac 'O The North. As you know, my comment was in response to Mr Jones' criticism of Delyth Jewell, a young woman who is to become an Assembly Member following the tragic death of Steffan Lewis. Here is the tweet that prompted my response:



68 Pontypridd Road, Porth CF39 9PL | ☎ 01443 681420 |
e: leanne.wood@assembly.wales | leanne.wood@cynulliad.cymru

Dilynwch | Follow Leanne Facebook: LeanneRhondda | Twitter @LeanneWood
Gwefan: www.leannerhondda.cymru | Website: www.leannerhondda.wales

It is worth noting in reference to the above image that Ein Gwlad is the political party Jones helped to form. I do not know if he controls the Twitter account however.

Before I set out the reasons for my tweet, it is worth setting out a little context here. Jones has been a persistent, pernicious influence in Welsh politics for many years. His blogs often contain disparaging comments about women and minorities as well as Plaid Cymru; which are seemingly his chief pet hates. I defend freedom of speech but there are limits to this and Jones frequently crosses the line and regularly writes untruths.

A prime example came during his feverish campaign to “expose” a so-called conspiracy between Plaid Cymru under my leadership and the lobbying firm Deryn (there was no such conspiracy) to oust Neil McEvoy from the party. I believe I have a strong case of defamation against Mr Jones for the blog posts he wrote on this subject. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]





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e: leanne.wood@assembly.wales | leanne.wood@cynulliad.cymru

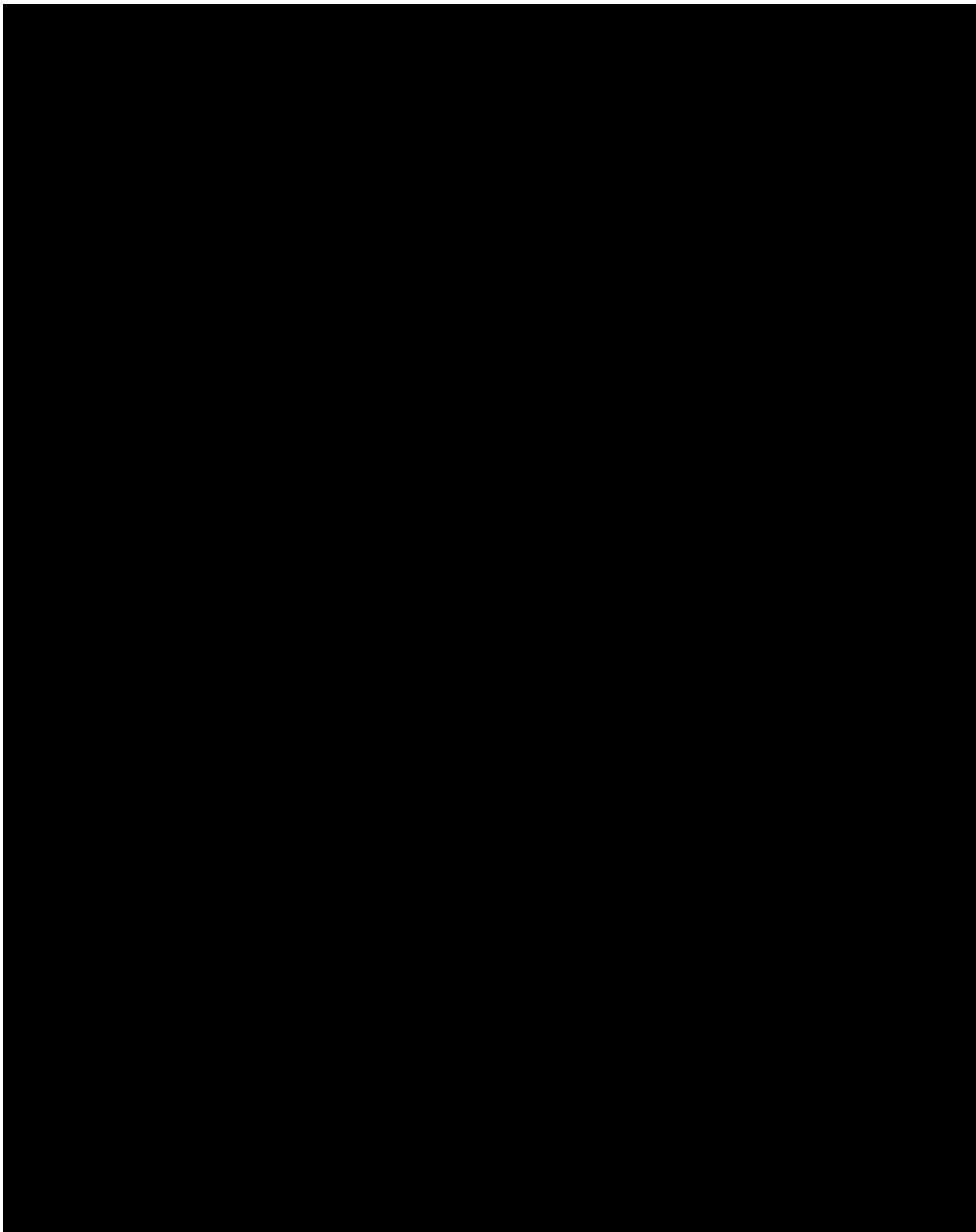
Dilynwch | Follow Leanne Facebook: LeanneRhondda | Twitter @LeanneWood
Gwefan: www.leannerhondda.cymru | Website: www.leannerhondda.wales



Whenever blogs like this are published, he invites his like-minded followers to comment and there appears to be no filter on this content. In his most recent blog post referencing me, more lies and unsubstantiated allegations are made about me.

I don't just disagree with Jones on political matters. I am certainly against his views when it comes to disability sport. Here is what he had to say about that: **“Am I alone in thinking there's an element of a Victorian freak show in the Paralympics?”**. I hope you are getting a picture of the kind of person we are dealing with here.





While I may have a thick skin after years of experience in the political arena, it is different matter for young women starting out in politics like Delyth and [REDACTED]. They are just two of many women I know who have been made to feel uneasy or uncomfortable by Jones' blog posts.

There is grave danger in allowing such an anti-women, anti-equality landscape to go unchecked. This was underlined in a recent event I attended which laid out how women are being put off from entering politics because of the toxic atmosphere that is maintained by the likes of Jones and his followers.

68 Pontypridd Road, Porth CF39 9PL | ☎ 01443 681420 |
e: leanne.wood@assembly.wales | leanne.wood@cynulliad.cymru

Dilynwhch | Follow Leanne Facebook: LeanneRhondda | Twitter @LeanneWood
Gwefan: www.leannerhondda.cymru | Website: www.leannerhondda.wales

When I responded to the tweet in question it was with a determination to stand up to what I saw as another case of bullying and intimidation of a young woman entering politics.

I don't regret using the only type of language that someone like Jones understands. His tweet warranted a strong and direct response and I provided that. This was done in the spirit of Selflessness in the Code of Conduct as I took the decision in the public interest. I would also argue that I did not bring the Assembly into disrepute by standing up to an infamous bully in the manner I did.

Yours sincerely,



Leanne Wood AM

Croesewir gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg neu Saesneg. *We welcome correspondence in Welsh or English.*

STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

Leanne Wood AM
Tŷ Hywel
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff
CF99 1NA

4th February 2019

Dear Ms Wood,

Thank you for your letter of 31st January 2019 and for setting out your reasons for calling Jac O' The North an "arsehole".

I appreciate the frustrations that politicians, whether male or female, experience when they see their policies and priorities attacked or criticised in a way which they do not consider fair or accurate. I am also sensitive to the fact that women in public life are sometimes subjected to threats and abuse which are wholly unacceptable and I am aware, of course, that you have been subjected to such behaviour.

However, Jac O' The North in the tweets which led up to your comment did not attack anyone – neither you nor Ms Jewell. His comment was directed only at her stated political interests, namely, women's rights and international development and their impact on Plaid Cymru. Whether one agrees with Jac O' The North's views on this matter or not, they are views which a political commentator/blogger is entitled to hold and express.

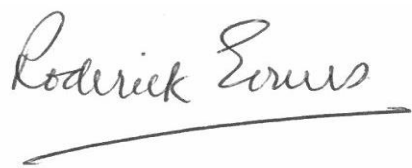
My letter to you of 24th January 2019 was part of my preliminary investigation of the complaint I had received and having considered the results of that preliminary investigation I have determined under the Procedure for Dealing with Complaints against Assembly Members that the complaint is admissible.

I, therefore, now move to the formal investigation stage and write to ask whether there is any further information you wish to give me before I consider whether there has been a breach of the Code of Conduct and/or of the Assembly's Dignity and Respect Policy.

Y Pierhead
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—
Croesewir gohebiaeth yn y Gymraeg a'r Saesneg

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Tel: 0300 200 6539
Email: Standards.Commissioner@assembly.wales
—
We welcome correspondence in both English and Welsh

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Roderick Evans". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal stroke.

Sir Roderick Evans
Y Comisiynydd Safonau
Standards Commissioner



Leanne Wood AC/AM

Aelod Cynulliad dros y Rhondda
Assembly Member for the Rhondda

Roderick Evans
Standards Commissioner
Pierhead
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
CF99 1NA

12 February 2019

Dear Roderick Evans

I was disappointed to receive your letter dated 5 February. I had hoped that you would be able to see this misogynistic bullying for what it is and would have therefore understood my robust reaction to it. I do not accept that the original tweet was not an attempt to undermine Delyth Jewell.

I can inform you that my interactions with this individual have taken place over many years, that he is abusive and obnoxious, that he picks on women and other minorities and he deserves strong challenge. I am not about to give in to online bullies, and I will continue to stand up to them.

I will cooperate fully with your investigation but I thought it only fair for you to be aware of my position on this.

Yours sincerely,

Leanne Wood AM

Croesewir gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg neu Saesneg. *We welcome correspondence in Welsh or English.*

Statement of Leanne Wood AM

I am the Assembly Member for Rhondda. I have been asked by the Commissioner for Standards about a comment I posted on Twitter on 16th January 2019 which was directed at a man who calls himself Jac O' The North and who posts a political blog.

At 4.49pm that day Jac O' The North posted a BBC Wales Politics article on twitter confirming Delyth Jewell's joining the Assembly following the death of Steffan Lewis. He did so without comment. At 5.15pm he repeated the posting this time with the comment "Women's rights and international development'. God help Plaid Cymru."

My dealings with Jac O' The North go back over many years. I have written to the Commissioner giving him examples of his tweets and comments. I regard him as an obnoxious bully who picks on women and minorities and I read his tweet about Delyth Jewell as a further example of his bullying a young woman who was entering the Assembly. I decided to respond robustly.

At 9.37pm I responded by tweeting "Do you have to be an arsehole all the time? Have a day off". I have been informed by the Commissioner that a member of the public complained about my tweet and my calling Jac O' The North an arsehole. I stand by my comment. I firmly believe that people like Jac O' The North need to be confronted and their views challenged firmly in language that they understand. I do not normally use unparliamentary language on social media but I do reserve the right to deal with online bullies robustly.

12 March 2019

Annex B: Supporting documents submitted by Leanne Wood AM

Written Evidence – Welsh Women’s Aid

Don’t Be A Bystander

In Wales, our national “Don’t Be A Bystander” campaign issued by Welsh Government is clear.

- We should not stand by or accept violence against women, domestic abuse or sexual violence in our communities. By remaining silent, we condone abuse, we minimise it, we give abusers permission to continue their behaviour.
- We should understand that it is never the victim’s fault, the responsibility must always rest with the abuser. Asking women to explain themselves or justify their actions is victim-blaming.
- Don’t be a bystander. Take action if you’re concerned about someone or about someone’s abusive behaviour, call it out, tell someone.

Yet at Welsh Women’s Aid, we also know sometimes that when women in particular dare speak out, call out abuse, and stand up for other women we are concerned about, we will likely face criticism because those with more perceived power or social status want us to keep quiet.

When we see women challenge and call out written or verbal attacks against other women, however innocuous the criticism might seem, we know that this is often a response not only to one comment but more often than not, to the continuum of experiences we face every day. These range from the unpleasant but non-threatening to the serious threats of violence and everything in between which have significant impacts on women.

When women are given permission by state services and Governments to call out abuse when they see it, to not be a bystander, many women are galvanised by the torrent of abuse and misogyny they’ve cumulatively experienced online and in public life, to stand up, speak out and take action against the trolls, bullies and misogynists attacking them or other women.

We also know that abusers can be expert manipulators and controllers, and abusive men know that to trigger a response from women, they don’t always have

to be explicitly abusive. All they need to do is add to the drip-drip-drip cacophony of negative criticisms and put-downs against women, to instigate resistance or an active bystander response, which they can then use against her to bring her down.

We know women in public life – especially politicians – are routinely abused and forced to take matters into their own hands and to report threats to the police, whilst simultaneously standing up for their female colleagues. When we then see women in public life being subject to complaints by anonymous members of the public, because they dare to speak up, shout back, call out or stand up for other women facing negative criticism or derogatory comments, we also know this is intended to wear her down, put her “in her place”, knock her back or damage her professionally.

When women in public life are subject to the same systems designed to uphold standards in public life as men, we know they must work harder to prove themselves and are judged harsher for any apparent lapse in standards than their male counterparts. We know that if these systems fail to adopt a gender-informed approach to regulating standards, by not taking into account the context in which woman-abuse and complaints made against women happens, or the culture of relentless misogyny online, the system will likely fail women.

Standards in public life need to take into account the context in which women occupy public space, and in which women in public life operate and are judged by. The effective application of standards of conduct and behaviour should not be about treating everyone the same. Standards of behaviour need to accommodate the reality of women’s lives: as women, we have a responsibility to use the tools at our disposal to defend ourselves and other women against bullies and misogynists, racists and homophobes.

If the system fails to understand who is doing what to whom, who is the primary aggressor who has the patriarchy behind them, and who is the non-violent resistor, then the system itself takes the side of the abuser, whilst contributing to women’s silence and expanding the space for action for misogynists, racists and bullies everywhere.

Written Evidence – Glitch

Online Abuse explained by Glitch.

Online Abuse is a catch-all term for various tactics and malicious behaviours online. This ranges from sharing embarrassing or cruel content about a person, impersonating, doxing and stalking, to the non-consensual use of photography and violent threats. The purpose of harassment differs with every incidence, but

usually includes wanting to embarrass, humiliate, scare, threaten, silence, extort or, in some instances, encourage mob attacks or malevolent engagements. Some of these tactics are defined below.

Online Gender-Based Violence (OGBV) is generally defined as harmful action by one or more people directed at others based on their sexual or gender identity or by enforcing harmful gender norms. These harmful acts of violence are committed, assisted or aggravated in part or fully by the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), such as mobile phones, the internet, social media platforms or email. Both women and men experience gender-based violence but the majority of victims are women and girls.

When exploring online abuse it is important to note that those with multi-intersecting identities will experience online abuse differently and in most cases be disproportionately impacted.

Multi-intersecting Identities refers to social factors such as race, origin, ethnicity, sexuality, gender identity, class or disability that also influence how different women experience OGBV. For instance, recent research by Amnesty International revealed black women are 84% more likely to be mentioned in abusive or problematic tweets than white women.

Online Violence Against Politically Active Women

There has been much discussion about the online abuse and violence politically active women face. Violence against women in politics (VAW-P) encompasses all forms of aggression, coercion and intimidation against women as political actors simply because they are women ('93 UN Declaration on VAW). It is designed to restrict the political participation of women as a group. It is directed at women as civic leaders, voters, political party members, candidates, elected representatives and appointed officials (*National Democratic Institute, #NotTheCost Campaign 2017*). @GlitchUK