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Jo Cox murder: what can be done to protect MPs – and British democracy?

June 16, 2016 7.53pm BST



Jo Cox, who died after a shooting in her constituency on June 16. Yui Mok/PA

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It was just before 5pm when a sombre Dee Collins, the temporary chief constable of West Yorkshire police in northern England, read out the news. The Labour Member of Parliament for Batley and Spen had died from injuries sustained earlier in the day.

Cox was shot as she attended her political “surgery”. Such meetings allow British politicians to engage regularly with the public they represent – they are a cornerstone of the country’s democracy. All MPs, members of the European Parliament and local councillors hold them. Surgeries allow constituents to raise issues directly with those they elect.

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But this tragic death is now bound to raise questions about security provisions for British politicians. And sadly, it won't be the first time these questions will have been asked.

Attacks of this kind are rare, but four UK politicians have been targeted in recent years at local surgeries. In 2010, Labour MP [Stephen Timms](#) was stabbed and wounded during one of his surgeries. Questions were asked then about whether he should have been better protected.

In 2000 a Liberal Democrat MP and a councillor were attacked at a surgery in Cheltenham in the West of England by a man with a sword. The councillor, Andrew Pennington, was killed, and the MP, Nigel Jones was seriously injured. Then, too, [questions were asked](#).

In the wake of that incident, Labour MP Dan Norris said: "If any research were to be done it would find they [politicians] are facing much more violence than anyone suspects." Even then, some 16 years ago, he said that more and more MPs were keeping their constituency office details secret to protect staff. Since then MPs [have spoken to researchers](#) about fears for their safety.

One question regards who would provide the security if MPs were to be more protected. Only senior cabinet ministers and former Northern Ireland secretaries receive publicly funded protection at the moment. And as there are there are 650 MPs, hundreds more councillors and Members of the European Parliament, protecting each individual would amount to an extra strain that [already stretched](#) police forces would be unlikely to be able to manage.

Another option would be to employ private security, but who would pay for these services – the party the politician belongs to, the individual politician or would it come from the public purse?

Some UK politicians require constituents to book an appointment to see them during their surgeries, but this would not stop a determined individual from forcing their way into the surgery to attack a politician.

The other option is of course to simply stop holding surgeries. But that would amount to a serious erosion of freedoms in any liberal democracy. Despite their fears over the years, British politicians recognise that they are elected by local people and

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that their job is to serve local people.

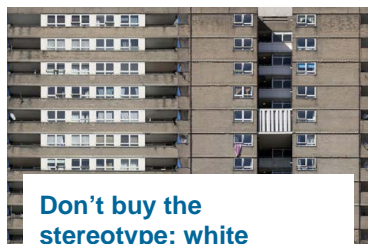
So that leaves one option – tighter security for British politicians like Jo Cox. It may be that the police could be paid to do the job using central government funds. It may also be that politicians' surgeries have an appointment only system.

We are of course at the opening stage of these questions being asked. It is, however, imperative that answers are found, and found quickly.

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