



VICTIM: Conservative MP Sir David Amess died after he was stabbed several times at a constituency surgery last Friday

Time to unmask social media trolls

THIS time last week, David Amess would have been checking through his diary, making plans for that weekly ritual of elected politicians, the Friday surgery. Little did he know then that within 24 hours he would be dead, that his political enemies would be eulogising him and the town he loved so well would be elevated to city status in his honour.

There is much we would have disagreed about – not least Brexit, for which he was a champion. But we would have agreed on other things, among them his concern for animal welfare. Perhaps the most striking thing about Amess was his tenacious commitment to his constituents and his refusal to play the tempting political games that might have taken him into office.

All too often the political work that really matters – fighting for one's constituents – is overlooked. Amess was, by all accounts, an exemplary constituency MP.

I regard myself as pretty unshockable but when I heard the news on Friday, I was deeply disturbed. Like many I have contempt for much of what goes on at Westminster. But I cannot think of a better system than democracy and I believe the threat to any MP is a threat to us all.

Here, political representatives have too often been in the firing line. Amess is not the first MP to die in such circumstances, and whatever measures are put in place, he is unlikely to be the last.

I am not so naïve as to think that there has been a decline in standards. The history of the world is littered with extremism, with political assassinations, and with polarising ideologies which target innocent people in the pursuit of purity. But there has been a fundamental shift over the past two decades or so

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which has given licence to extremists of all political persuasions and none to target, in the most pernicious way, people in public life. That shift has accelerated polarisation, and it has gifted government to ideologues and populists from Bolsonaro in the west to Duterte in the east – and all points in between.

In large part, that shift is the result of the unrestrained rise of social media, and the greed of large multi-nationals which profit from it by deploying algorithms that foment division, and which feed the deluded with stories that reinforce their prejudices.

The level of abuse suffered by public figures has long passed acceptability – death threats, threats of sexual violence, attacks on their loved ones, are now part and parcel of being in public life. And some of the most vile abuse is directed at women.

Social media has given a platform to people who are a disgrace to humanity. Day in and day out the apologists defend

the Facebooks, Twitters and Instagrams of this world. They talk about their systems to moderate comments, their penalties against those who transgress; they speak of innovations in artificial intelligence which will root out wrongdoers. And yes, the American insurrectionist Donald Trump has been deprived of his Twitter account. But this is all window dressing.

While social media giants allow the trolls to hide under the cover of anonymity, they will be free to spew out their bile. Anyone can set up an account and go to war on the public figure of their choice; a footballer because he is black; a reality TV star because they have ginger hair; a politician because she is a woman. And when I say war, I mean war – using language that has no place in a family newspaper and which stains the user every bit as much as it distresses the receiver.

Few of us are beyond reproach in this. When I reflect on my changing attitudes over the years I recognise in myself a hardening of heart, a temptation to see those I disagree with in distinct terms rather than shades of grey, and an unwillingness to 'step into the other person's shoes'.

One of those I would have dismissed out of hand with an expletive is the MP for Rayleigh and Wickford, one Mark Francois whose views on pretty well everything I would dispute. But he pulled me up short when, in the Commons this week, he committed himself to a bill to prevent trolls hiding behind pseudonyms. MPs, he said, should call social media bosses to account "for their actions or rather their inactions that make them even richer than they already are".

The oxygen of publicity is the best way of disarming the trolls and calling them to account. On this Francois is right.

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ON THIS DAY

OCTOBER 21 1971

'Torture' Allegations

THE torture and brainwashing of internees in NI was spotlighted in London yesterday by three SDLP MPs, Messrs John Hume, Austin Currie and Paddy O'Hanlon. After a day spent in talks with political leaders, the MPs said they were satisfied that at last the plight of the internees was being brought forcibly home in Britain. Before his meeting with the British Prime Minister, Mr Heath, the Opposition leader, Mr Wilson was fully briefed by the MPs with documented evidence that internees had been tortured. The SDLP delegation gave Mr Wilson a dossier containing the statements of many internees about mistreatment by the Army and RUC Special Branch.

The MPs were completely disappointed with the terms of the subsequent Downing Street statement that the 'brainwashing' allegations were within the scope of the inquiry by Sir Edmund Compton into complaints of physical violence. Later Mr Currie told the BBC of the 22 different types of torture which had been documented had been tried out on Mr Patrick Joseph McClean of Beragh in an effort to break him.

The Irish News commented: 'There is something larger than coincidence in the number of complaints of brainwashing and sheer brutality which accompany interrogations now being carried out at Palace Barracks...'

Dragnet for IRA Chief

DUTCH police were last night searching for Mr David [Dáithí] O'Connell, believed to be Chief of Staff of the Provisional IRA in connection with the seizure in Amsterdam of an air consignment of four tons of arms. The police suspect the arms were destined for NI. Dutch police yesterday also pressed on with a nationwide search for an Irish girl, Miss Moira Maguire (23) believed to be accompanying Mr O'Connell. O'Connell (33), a native of Cork, is a teacher at Ballyshannon Vocational School. He was active in the IRA border campaign.

Notice from the Government of Northern Ireland

THE civil disobedience campaign – Parliament has now passed laws to counter the campaign of civil disobedience. ... Do not be misled. Civil wrongs secure no rights. Civil disobedience will not build houses or bring jobs. The Rent and Rates Strike is a self-inflicted wound.

By helping to end the present campaign, you will help yourself, your family and your fellow-citizens.

BY OCTOBER 1971 allegations of the use of torture in the case of a number of internees, known as the 'hooded men' and including Civil Rights campaigner, PJ McClean, were the subject of the Compton Inquiry. Meanwhile IRA attempts to smuggle in modern weapons from Eastern Europe were revealed while the Faulkner government sought to curb the escalating rent and rates strike by punitive measures.

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