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NEWS

EXCLUSIVE FEATURE: PART II

Poilievre shakes up senior ranks of Conservative Party

Despite boosted security measures in recent years, MPs say 'weaknesses' in systems of support remain

BY CHELSEA NASH & MIKE LAPOINTE

In the wake of increasing harassment, hate, and threats against Members of Parliament, the House has been working to implement new security measures for MPs and their staff, but gaps remain, say MPs.

After being stalked by a member of the public in 2020 and subjected to a slew of online threats and harassment, NDP MP Charlie Angus (Timmins-James Bay, Ont.) said he doesn't find the resources available to him as an MP to be of much use.

"The parliamentary security, [their] responses to me aren't very helpful," he said.

"I get told by House security, 'Well, call your local police,'" Angus said. "Well, you know, the local OPP detachment is in no capacity to address online threats from unknown sources," he said.

Currently, through the House, MPs have the option to have their home assessed by security experts, and a security system installed. They have also been given mobile panic buttons that they can carry with them while out and about, which, when pressed, will alert the local authorities and Parliamentary Protective Services. When MPs are subjected to threats and they bring them to the attention of the House of Commons, the House

Conservative Party fundraising director Jaime Girard and research director Jim Miller are out while Tony Clement is the new national fundraising co-ordinator for the Conservative Party.

BY ABBAS RANA

After announcing his 80-member shadow cabinet in October, Pierre Poilievre has been busy putting together a team of senior political aides to prepare the party for the next federal election which the Conservatives think is theirs to lose.

In an effort to stitch together a team of top-notch staffers, Poilievre (Carleton, Ont.) has been

Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre is shaking things up at the Conservative Party of Canada HQ and fundraising is a big focus. The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade



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Exclusive Feature: Part II

Despite boosted security measures in recent years, MPs say ‘weaknesses’ in systems of support remain



On Sept. 26, 2022, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau walks with his security detail on Wellington Street. Currently, the RCMP has a shortage of the special officers in its protection unit, which is responsible for providing security to Canada's prime minister and ministers, the Governor General, Supreme Court justices, diplomats, and foreign dignitaries. *The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade*

Adapting security resources and supports for MPs is an ‘ongoing process’ says Public Safety Minister Marco Mendicino who has had a death threat. NDP MP Charlie Angus, who had a stalker, says he doesn’t find the resources available to him as an MP to be of much use. Many MPs agree.

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does provide MPs with ongoing support as they interact with local police, and it monitors the situation of online threats.

The House provides support in other ways, too. When Liberal MP Yasir Naqvi won Ottawa Cen-

tre, Ont. in 2021, after Catherine McKenna decided not run again, he said he worked with House officials to take some precautions to minimize the hate and harassment he and his staff experienced. McKenna was one of the most harassed MPs during her time as environment minister, with her harassers spray-painting her office with misogynistic slurs and targeting her staff. Naqvi said he worked with the House of Commons to find a new office location, one that would have the safeguard of being in an office building and not a storefront, he said.

NDP Whip Rachel Blaney (North Island-Powell River, B.C.) said the House “and Parliament as a whole” take the issue of security for MPs and political staff seriously, but did say there needs to be improvement.

Blaney said the House is currently “in a process” of working to better improve its response to the security of MPs off the Hill.

“So we’ll see what comes out of it at the other end of the process,” she said. Blaney said the House needs a “better assessment of the needs” of MPs and the kind of support they require.

“The focus is really on the supports that they can provide

while we’re on the [Parliamentary] Precinct, and I think we have to explore what that will look like off [the Precinct],” she said.

“It’s just figuring out a new model of how to do this, because things are changing,” she said, noting two areas requiring improvement: security strategy for MPs who are working in public in their ridings, and threats via social media.

“There isn’t necessarily a very good ability to provide protection

or to provide some sort of support if somebody is experiencing fixation of a person who might be following them, or stalking them, or harassing them through social media,” she said. “That is definitely a weakness,” she added.

According to the Parliamentary Protective Service (PPS), “the physical security within the Parliamentary Precinct is the responsibility of the PPS.”

“The security of Members of Parliament outside the Parliamentary Precinct is a matter that may involve different parties depending on jurisdictions,” it said in an emailed statement.

Blaney also said addressing threats launched over social media is another area of concern.

“Another weakness I would say is

that with technology being what it is, sometimes there are threats that could come through social media, and there isn’t necessarily the best process for identifying where those people are, because there are resource challenges in different parts of Canada in terms of local police,” she said. “That is something I’m personally concerned about.”

In the wake of having been stalked and subjected to other forms of harassment, Angus reached out to other MPs who were also facing threats of physical violence. Once he started talking publicly about his experience, others, including Conservative MP Michelle Rempel Garner (Calgary Nose Hill, Alta.), reached out to him to share their own experiences, which he said has been helpful.

Both Angus and Rempel Garner have been subjects of a conspiracy theory which alleges the World Economic Forum—an economic conference hosted annually in Davos, Switzerland—is actually an elitist cabal with a secret, socialist agenda. The conspiracy gained traction during the pandemic, when the WEF issued a white paper titled *The Great Reset*.

Rempel Garner wrote about how online conspiracies can quickly turn into dangerous situations in the real world. She explained how, during the 2021 election campaign, she and her husband went for a late meal at a local pub, when her husband, Jeff, noticed something wrong.

“A thickly built man seated at the bar was paying too much attention to me. He crossed the floor of the restaurant, camera in hand. His actions and his posture clearly said that he was bent on physically harming me, causing an altercation, or both,” Rempel Garner wrote. The man was yelling about the World Economic Forum and its founder Klaus Schwab as he ran towards Rempel Garner.

Online threats in general are “a very different kind of threat,” said Angus. The pervasiveness and anonymity of online threats make it difficult to know who is making them.

Right now, if an MP is experiencing hate, harassment, or threats, Blaney said the process in place “really is about working with your local police force, with the House of Commons.” But the inconsistency of police force resources and/or capacity across the country is a big variable that means some MPs get better responses than others.

When asked what plans Public Safety Minister Marco Mendicino (Eglinton-Lawrence, Ont.) had for addressing increasing concerns from Members of Parliament, his office referenced the minister’s response to a recent instance of rape threats against the wife of Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, Ont.).

“I am very concerned with the alarming increase of incidents that involve very aggressive, offensive and in some cases, blatantly criminal language,” Mendicino said in that statement.



NDP MP Charlie Angus said he doesn’t find the resources available to him as an MP to be helpful when dealing with issues in his riding and threats online. *The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade*

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"We are in the process of ensuring that the Parliamentary Protective Service, the sergeant-at-arms, and the RCMP have all of the tools that they need to protect MPs and their teams and ministers as well. This is ongoing



Former Liberal MP and minister Catherine McKenna was subjected to a slew of harassment and hate during her time in office. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

When asked whether it had re-directed resources to contend with the rise in threats and harassment against MPs, the RCMP replied that, "as required, resources from other areas may be redeployed on a short-term basis to meet operational needs."

According to the RCMP's

harassment since she was first elected in 2015, much of it Islamophobic in nature. At the end of 2016, Khalid introduced M-103, a motion for the government to condemn Islamophobia and all forms of systemic racism and religious discrimination.

In a bitter irony, Khalid faced extreme harassment and hate in response to her motion, to the point where she had a police cruiser parked outside her house for a time, her office was vandalized, there were protesters and anti-protesters outside her office, and "a number of violent incidents that we witnessed in the area," she said.

Khalid said she did find the police to be responsive to the needs of her and her staff during that time, and said the Parliamentary Protective Services was also responsive. They offered her a personal security detail, she said, but she declined.

"I just didn't feel comfortable taking it because, I mean, what kind of a grassroots, community-based politician would I be if I felt the need to be separated from my own community?" she said.

Khalid also did not take up the offer of a security evaluation and security system installation in her home, because she had already installed one herself in 2017.

But, she said she got panic buttons and CCTV in her constituency office through Parliament's services. The process for installation was a smooth one, she said.

Green Party MP Elizabeth May (Saanich-Gulf Islands, B.C.) agreed with the sentiment that increased security for MPs can get in the way of community engagement.

Speaking to the suggestion that, in the wake of the Freedom Convoy, the block of Wellington Street in front of Parliament Hill be closed to public traffic, May

said she didn't think that was a good idea.

"I don't think we should respond to a climate that's increasingly hostile by hiding," she said. May said she has experienced death threats and vitriol for many years, but she doesn't carry a mobile panic button (she hasn't been offered one, she said).

She did take advantage of the security measures available for her constituency office, and has a panic button there, she said.

Evolution of security threats against MPs

During a segment on CBC in November 2019, journalist Andrew Chang said that "as political divisions grow deeper in this country, more and more online rhetoric crosses the line into abuse against politicians and their staff, even real-life threats."

NDP MP Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, B.C.) said at the time that her office has a panic button.

"And so if at any point in time where people are feeling threatened or unsafe, you can actually press the panic button and then help would arrive," said Kwan.

Government House Leader Mark Holland (Ajax, Ont.), who was chief government whip at the time, said then that "more needs to be done and that some of the things we're looking at, both in terms of: are there additional security measures that we can take, how do we deal with remote offices where maybe only one person is working at that office."

Events in neighbouring democracies also served as a stark reminder of threats against elected officials.

Canada hasn't had to contend with the results of physical interactions between constituents and political representatives, like the United Kingdom and Japan have in recent years, though it has had its fair share of violent attempts.

In 2016, U.K. Member of Parliament Jo Cox, a British Labour Party politician, died after being shot and stabbed multiple times following a constituency meeting. According to reports at the time, her assailant was heard shouting "Britain first," which was the name of a far-right party in the U.K.

Then in October 2021, British member of Parliament David Amess was murdered, having been stabbed to death after a meeting with constituents. His death raised

questions around how MPs conduct business and what the security resources are that are available to protect elected officials.

Japan's former prime minister Shinzo Abe died in hospital after being shot during a campaign event this past July.

The attack was «an act of brutality that happened during the elections—the very foundation of our democracy—and is absolutely unforgivable,» said Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida at the time.

Meanwhile, the global pandemic has heightened tensions and increased threats against some MPs.

When MPs began returning in person to the House of Commons back in November 2021, despite then having the option of having security systems installed in their homes, and panic buttons at home and in their offices, MPs were still feeling uneasy at the time, according to a 2021 report from the *Niagara Falls Review*.

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How MPs Are Dealing With Online Threats

Former Green leader May, who has been in office since 2011, attributes the rise in hate and harassment to social media. "[Social media] has become an increasingly misogynistic, nasty space for any woman with a profile," she said, "but particularly for women in politics." May said that on platforms like Twitter, threats of sexual violence are routine, daily occurrences.

Liberal MP Khalid said she and her team have learned some valuable lessons over the past five years about engaging online. "Putting a face to every single person who has anything to say in the online space is the best way to not only protect freedom of speech and expression, but also to reduce the vitriol. It's this anonymity that really kills us all," she said.

Liberal MP Naqvi agreed. "I think you'll hear this from most of the members from all political stripes, that it's rampant, that it's anonymous, which I think gives people far more of a sense of strength on their part, and they can say whatever they want to," he said.

NDP MP Angus said he considers himself to be fairly "thick-skinned," but that he does have to use the "block" feature on Twitter and Facebook, and delete the most hateful comments online on a daily basis.

"I'd advise any young parliamentarian, or someone coming into public life, to start having real limits around social media," he said.

work. In other words, we are constantly reassessing the risks that are posed," he said at the time.

Mendicino himself has been subjected to death threats on social media, he revealed in July 2022.

Last month, the CBC and Radio-Canada reported that the RCMP was experiencing a shortage of special officers in its protection unit, which is responsible for providing security to Canada's prime minister and ministers, the Governor General, Supreme Court justices, diplomats, and foreign dignitaries.

"Even for the prime minister, they are short-staffed at the moment," one government source told the CBC.

In a statement, the RCMP recognized "the security environment in which public figures operate continues to evolve both within Canada and abroad," and acknowledged an uptick in harassment, threats, and other forms of intimidation.

"While attacks against political figures in Canada are rare, the threats of a violent attack against a cabinet minister or opposition leader is never discounted," according to the statement. "The RCMP analyzes every threat or derogatory comment received. Protective measures are intelligence-led and are proportional to any threats or risks assessed by the RCMP to ensure those most at risk are provided with the protection they need."

union—the National Police Federation—its asks for the 2023 federal budget to include addressing the force's human resource shortages, focusing on the recruitment issue.

"We are asking the federal government to invest \$50-million over five years to implement a national recruitment strategy to address the RCMP's police human resource shortages, including the expansion of the experienced police officer program," wrote manager of media relations Fabrice de Dongo in an email to *The Hill Times*.

Finding the balance between security and connecting with community

Liberal MP Iqra Khalid (Mississauga-Erin Mills, Ont.) has been subjected to hate and



NDP Whip Rachel Blaney said there are 'weaknesses' in the PPS and House of Commons support systems for MPs experiencing harassment and/or threats. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

Timeline of Increased Security Measures for MPs

March 2017: In response to an anti-Islamophobia motion, a number of Liberal MPs reported an increase in "harassment, hatred, and even death threats." According to *The Toronto Star*, cabinet considered ways to help MPs from any party grappling with hatred and harassment at their offices.

November 2019: NDP MP Kwan has a panic button installed in her Vancouver constituency office, according to CBC. Green MP May flew in a private security consultant to assess her staff's safety after receiving death threats. Liberal federal cabinet minister Mélanie Joly (Ahuntsic-Cartierville, Que.) was reported to keep her Quebec constituency office locked, with staff members using a doorbell and a security camera to control access to the office.

October 2020: The House Board of Internal Economy (BOIE) approves funding for security en-

hancements for MPs, including security evaluations and security system installation in their homes and constituency offices, and panic buttons. In December 2020, the BOIE's main estimates pegged the cost for security enhancements for MPs at \$6.6-million.

January-February 2022: Freedom Convoy increases harassment, hate, and threats, to the point where House Sgt.-at-Arms Patrick McDonnell told the Procedure and House Affairs Committee in June that he was "flabbergasted" at the Ottawa Police Service's lack of response to the harassment MPs and their staff were experiencing during that time. One female staffer was accosted by a man who "tried to throw what appeared to be human feces on her," McDonnell told Catherine Cullen on CBCNN's *The National* in June.

July 2022: Liberal MP Judy Sgro, (Humber River-Black Creek, Ont.), told *The Toronto Star* in July 2022 that she noticed a man following her.

"I kept walking and he kept walking with me," Sgro recalls. "So I said, 'Okay, you made your point, please go away now.' And he just was persistent. And I was at a spot where there wasn't anybody else around me," she told the *Star*. The next day, she asked parliamentary security for a panic button.

June 2022: MPs get "mobile duress alarms," or portable panic buttons, which can be used across Canada and, when pressed, would notify Parliamentary Protective Services and local police that there is a threat. NDP MP Heather McPherson, who represents Edmonton Strathcona, Alta., told CBC Radio's *As It Happens* that she got one of the buttons "the first time I heard that they were available."

"I do worry about my safety. And I worry about the safety of my family. I worry ... I have children. I worry about the safety of my constituency and my parliamentary staff. I have not had to use my panic button. I do have security at my home. We have a panic button in our office, and I carry a panic button with me as well. But, you know, as a Member of Parliament, as a mother, as a New Democrat in Alberta, there are serious constraints," she said at the time.

The Winnipeg Free Press reported in June that Liberal MP Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Man.) had started taking a panic button with him when engaging directly with constituents. "Without the panic button, I don't know to what degree I'd be as open," Lamoureux was quoted as saying.