

HOW SAFE ARE BRITAIN'S POLITICIANS TODAY?

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On 15 October 2021, Conservative Member of Parliament (MP) for Southend West, Sir David Amess was stabbed to death (Lee, 2021). At the time, Amess was attending a constituency surgery at a church in Leigh-on-Sea – located in his constituency (ibid). In short, the MP died doing his job, taking time out of his day to speak to local people about issues of concern. Unfortunately, the politician's murder was not the first to happen in Britain.

Most Britons remember the death of Labour MP for Batley and Spen, Jo Cox in 2016 (BBC, 2016). She was shot and stabbed to death at her constituency surgery in Birstall Library – located in West Yorkshire (ibid). Said murder took place in the context of heightened political tensions – a few days before the Brexit referendum was due to be held (Sabbagh, 2021). At the time, Cox's murder was the first to happen to a sitting MP in Britain since 1990 (ibid). However, with Amess' death, it seems quite possible that it could happen again. Therefore, the question to ask is how safe are Britain's politicians today?

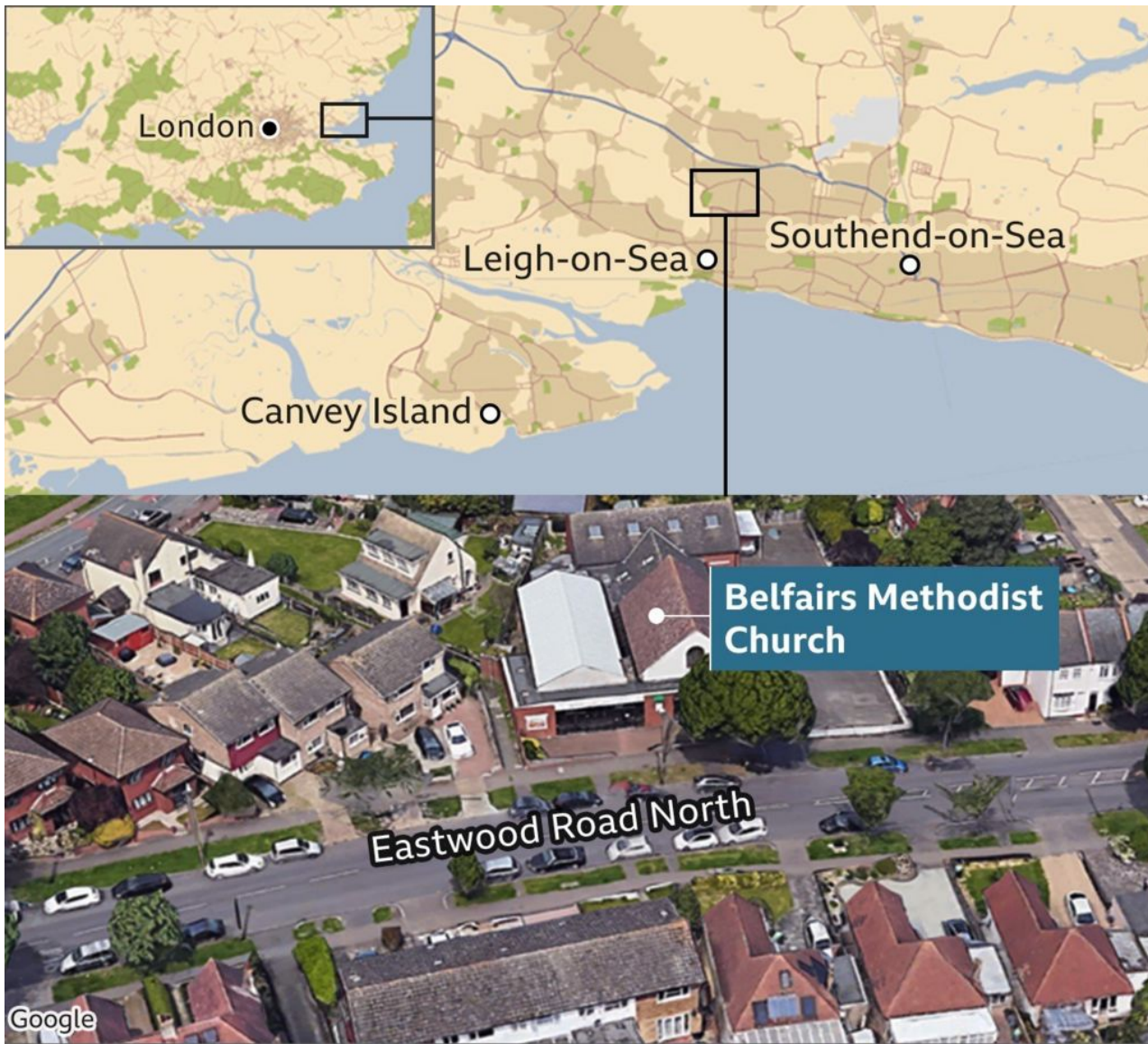


Figure 1 : Map of

where the attack on Amess took place. Source: BBC

Said question has also been highlighted by Britain's Home Secretary, Priti Patel (Lee, 2021). Speaking on the attack on Amess, she remarked it "represents a senseless attack on democracy itself" (ibid). Further, soon after the attack, she announced to the House of Commons that the threat level of attack posed to MPs had been raised to "substantial" (Heffer, 2021). The JTAC nominally divides threat levels into 5 categories: low, moderate, substantial, severe and critical (Morris, 2021). The "substantial" threat level means another attack is "likely" (Heffer, 2021; Morris, 2021). Remarking on the change, Patel said it had been changed following an independent review by the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) (Heffer, 2021). The Home Secretary also noted the threat level was now the same as the threat posed to the UK as a

whole (ibid). This obvious increase in the threat level clearly indicates Britain's politicians are less safe than they were before.

Further, Ms. Patel coproduced a letter with Commons speaker, Sir Lindsay Hoyle, which revealed MPs would have extra protection at their constituency surgeries (Zeffman & Dathan, 2021). Said protection they revealed would come in the form of a "trained and accredited security operative" (Morris, 2021). The letter also urged MPs to "take up service" (ibid). Such actions being taken and encouraged suggests there is a significant risk to MPs' safety. The speed of which the measure is being rolled out is also quite telling. Speaking of, its speed could perhaps also be indicative of knowledge or intelligence that the Home Secretary was privy to, aside from the Amess killing, that warranted such a response.

Said knowledge and/or intelligence likely pertain to uncovered or foiled plots to attack MPs. This seems evident when considering in the past, Britain's Security Service (MI5) has briefed politicians on at least one terrorist attack on a politician it had thwarted (Dodd, 2017). That attack had been set to target the Prime Minister's residence at Downing Street and then sitting Prime Minister Theresa May (ibid). Similarly, more recently Britain's Deputy Prime Minister and former Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, revealed in the past two years he has received three threats "to life and limb" (Grierson, 2021). All of the said threats have resulted in intervention by the authorities – the most recent of which was an acid attack (ibid). Nevertheless, judging by Raab's revelations it would seem Britain's politicians do increasingly face threats to their safety.

Raab further eluded to "worse abuse" being experienced by female MPs – seemingly on social media. It is unclear though if such toxic abuse can be put into the same category as mortal threats. Further, on the subject of toxicity, former Commons speaker, Jon Bercow implied toxicity in political discourse needs to be addressed in order to prevent "hatred" (Taylor, 2021) – and presumably MPs' deaths. Stopping short of remarking there was still a ways to go vis-à-vis improvement of the toxic climate, Bercow acknowledged that "there's no complete protection or safeguard against " (ibid). The latter point, if true, suggests there will always be a danger for Britain's politicians – in some form or another.

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