

Workplace bullying should have no place in politics

Hannah White

Britain's political classes are accustomed to financial impropriety being grounds for sacking. Even if it was Nadhim Zahawi's lack of openness rather than his actual tax error which led to his ejection from cabinet, the Conservative party chair's exit felt inevitable. Most of his colleagues – if not he himself – appear to accept there must be consequences for ministers who break rules relating to their finances.

There is no such level of acceptance regarding penalties for ministers who bully. The tone was set by Boris Johnson's refusal to dismiss Priti Patel from cabinet after his own ethics adviser found she had bullied her civil servants. After taking over, Rishi Sunak also resisted sacking Gavin Williamson until pressure forced the Cabinet Office minister to resign over aggressive text messages to the former chief whip.

Now, pre-emptive briefing by senior Tories ahead of the conclusion of Adam Tolley KC's inquiry into claims of bullying against deputy prime minister Dominic Raab – which he denies – offers an alternative narrative about “woke” civil servants with a vendetta.

While the prime minister's spokesman has refused to confirm whether Sunak knew of informal complaints against Raab when he appointed him, his former colleague Jacob Rees-Mogg has dismissed civil servants' complaints as “snowflakey”. Rees-Mogg claimed that Raab had simply been demanding good service from “senior and well paid professionals” – despite not knowing the identity and grade of the complain-

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ants or the nature of their complaints. Senior backbencher Sir Bernard Jenkin sought to draw a distinction between the “many people who are incapable of being bullied” and those who “are very easily bullied”, arguing, “If you are at the top of the civil service and working closely with ministers, if you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen.” These remarks play down the physical, psychological and professional harm caused by bullying and seek to shift blame from perpetrator to target.

They suggest a hierarchy of resilience among those who are bullied, implying it is the weak who complain and the strong who remain silent. The inverse is true – it is only the bravest civil servants who dare stand up to powerful politicians. Surely where we draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour should not be determined by an individual's reaction?

Dismissively, Jenkin described bullying as “quite a new workplace wellbeing issue”. He is right that it was only in the wake of the #MeToo scandal that some settings – including Westminster – have accepted that people with power should not be allowed to use it to harm others. But he is wrong to imply that belated recognition of harmful behaviour reduces its significance. As with misogyny or racism, the harm caused by bullying was real well before those who suffered it had mechanisms to object. I know many brilliant public servants whose careers were ended by bullies of all political affiliations before a new independent system to adjudicate on bullying claims began to redress the imbalance of power. Previous generations of officials had no meaningful way of flagging complaints but that does not mean they were less “capable of being bullied”.

While accepting that financial impropriety is serious, some Conservatives apparently believe that ministers are due a deference that exempts them from normal standards of behaviour. Sunak's Ministerial Code should disabuse them of this, going as it does beyond stating that “harassing, bullying or other inappropriate or discriminating behaviour” will not be tolerated. Instead it emphasises that ministers should always treat others “with consideration and respect”. Even if members of his government do not understand or accept the impact of their behaviour on others, the code makes clear that it is they, not those who work for them, who are accountable.

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