

**INTERVIEW: MEMBER COMPLAINT
REFERENCES 94 & 95/2020**

Date:	7 December 2020
Venue:	Via Teams
Present:	Councillor Pauline Culley (PC) Bethany Symonds (BS)
Method of Recording:	Digital

Initials of speaker	
BS	Well my first question then is, well I wanted to start by asking you about your Facebook page so am I right in thinking that you've got two, one for personal and one for, one is a public page is that right
PC	Yes one's more, yeah one's more public. I have a personal one with people I actually like
BS	Yeah
PC	And then I've got a, yes a more open one
BS	Okay so what do you use the more open one for
PC	Mostly for liking and sharing things so mostly, well I would say 90% so I like and share all sorts of things. Stuff that the MP does. Stuff about bees. Stuff about animals and gardening and anything that the Council ever does with the library. Anything like that
BS	Okay
PC	So I just share things that, that I find interesting that I think might be, might interest others. I very rarely comment on any of the things I share but I just like, well on that site I was a prolific liker and sharer
BS	Okay. I'm just making a couple of notes
PC	Yeah yeah no that's fine

BS	So who, who do you have on that Facebook page. Again is that friends or is it people who live in your Ward, is it people you know or not
PC	Anybody who sent me a friend request
BS	Right
PC	Unless they live in America or out of the country. When I first started it I didn't really know what I was doing so I have a lot of people on there and I was just accepting anybody who sent me a friend request so the people who have been on there a while I have no idea who they are. I've never met them but they would have somehow found me right at the beginning and if they've sent me a friend request like I say unless they live somewhere that is, that isn't England then I tend to just accept whoever they are
BS	Okay and do you have any idea roughly of how many friends you would have on there or how many people would be following you on that page
PC	No
BS	Okay
PC	It's more than my friends though I'll be honest
BS	Right okay. Thank you . Right so I think I've got a good picture of what you use that page now. Okay. So the post in question where did you come across that post
PC	It just popped up on my feed like lots of, because I am a prolific sharer stuff tends to just as I'm flicking through it just appears. All sorts of, the majority of stuff I've shared on there is about the Council and what the Council's doing and then occasionally stuff just, it just appears on my page. I don't know where it (<i>connection issues</i>) and presumably it's from things other people have shared. I don't know. I don't know how Facebook works like that
BS	Did you have a look into where it had come from and whose post it was
PC	No
BS	Okay. So in terms of the post how, how do you interpret that. When you saw it what, what did you think that that post meant or what were you thinking it was about or what were you thinking it was saying
PC	Well I just was, like most of the things I did it was, it was just to show what other people are saying. It was to show that other people are saying

	these things. I didn't like the post so there's a, there's a little button that you can click to say like and share and some stuff I liked, if it's about a bee and bees being some kind of endangered species then I like that post and share it but this I just shared it because of what, it's just one of the many things other people were saying
BS	So what did you think it was saying that post
PC	Well I wouldn't, I was more interested in what other people were thinking of it
BS	Okay
PC	I mean, I'm not sure I had an agenda at all with it. I just, I just, I will have been flicking through and just seen it and shared it to see what people thought of it. I don't know whether I thought that, that much about it at the time
BS	Okay but it wasn't so much
PC	And I don't, I don't think that sharing it is belittling any kind of racist minority or any issues faced by people in Darlington or anywhere
BS	Okay okay well that was the next thing that I wanted to speak to you about because when I spoke to the member of the public that had got in touch about the post she said that when she looked at the image that was shared she thought that that post and I appreciate you didn't create that image and nobody's suggesting that you had but she thinks that that image was designed to undermine or to try and deny the severity of the trans-Atlantic slave trade by comparing it to other instances of slavery. What do you make of that. Do you think that that post does undermine that
PC	Well that's her opinion. This was also shared in The Northern Echo and the comments behind The Northern Echo at the bottom of it absolutely agree with my right to share that. There's 75% of the comments that are there are agreeing with the post itself. My opinion of that post to me is irrelevant because I wasn't (<i>connection issues</i>) in what I thought of it. I was interested in what other people thought of it. It was a point of view and if she's, if she's saying that it's undermined it that's her opinion. There are numerous other opinions saying the exact opposite to her
BS	What's your opinion

PC	Is that relevant
BS	I believe so
PC	Because my, my opinion is my opinion and not, this will become a public opinion. If I now say to you it'll become a public opinion and that was not what I was trying to do
BS	Okay. I think the suggestion has been though that by sharing it on a public page it became a public opinion at the time
PC	But I didn't say whether I liked or disliked it. I didn't do either of those. To me the whole thing is, I don't see why they've made such a big issue of this, the opposition Councillors because I have never said what I thought about the post. The Echo asked me. Some radio programme asked me and I have never personally said what I think about that post so I don't see why the, well I know why they're gunning for me it's political isn't it why they've done all of this
BS	Okay. Well even if you're not happy to share what you think of that post are you able to say what you think that post itself is trying to say. Regardless of saying whether you agree or disagree with what that post is saying what do you think it is saying
PC	What the post is saying, well that's the same thing as telling you my, well I wasn't interested in what I, we're back to that. I wasn't interested in what I thought of it. I was more interested in what it represented cos I hate racism. Absolutely hate it. And it's very, it was just a post. It was, to me it was just a post
BS	Okay so I think the feeling is that there are some racist aspects to that post is that something that you agree with, do you believe that it is
PC	Again we're back to it's irrelevant what I think. Right so nobody from Mowden my Ward has complained about this post. The comments in The Northern Echo were 75% agreeing with what the post said. That says more to me than anything that I could ever say and all of this that they've done, all they've done by making a big deal of this has made sure that it's seen wider than it ever would have been
BS	Yeah
PC	Which again I'm not sure if that's a bad thing or a good thing

BS	Okay so can I just clarify for the purposes of the record is it that you don't have an opinion on the post or the interpretation of the post or is it that you don't wish to share it
PC	Do I have an opinion. I think, I think people should be allowed to have their own opinion on things and not shout down anybody who has the opposite opinion. I think it's, it's the, well like we've had in Council it's accepting other people's views on things and not just yelling back at them because you happen to have the opposite view and appreciating that everybody's views are different. Well not everybody's. Clearly I have a lot of Conservative colleagues whose views are the same as mine in many ways. I mean the whole group, the Conservative group when we met they all said there is no case to answer in this, in this whole is there a hearing is there not a hearing. They also thought there was no case. The fact that I've shared the post is not in dispute. I have shared the post. It's the interpretation of why I've shared the post that seems to be causing all the trouble
BS	Okay. So just to pick up on what you've said there about respecting other people's views and everybody being entitled to different views I've spoken to the other Councillors about that and said you know is everybody not entitled to have their own separate views and share those and their thoughts on that were yes everybody is entitled to an extent but if it, if it's to do with a view or an opinion that could be said to be perpetuating issues of discrimination that ethnic minorities face then there's a line there and that's something that shouldn't be shared. How do you feel about that
PC	Well again it says more about them than it does about me. So this, sorry can you repeat that what they've said. They've said, they said what
BS	So they've, they've suggested that yes to an extent people do have the rights to share their own views on things but if it's a view that contributes to discrimination in society continuing at that point there should be a line drawn and that perhaps shouldn't be shared
PC	But is that not in itself a racist view that people are going to be offended by it

BS	Well I think what they're saying is if somebody, anybody shares a post that might contribute to discrimination continuing
PC	And again that's their opinion that it contributes to it
BS	Well that's their opinion that it might or that it could
PC	Yeah
BS	So what's your opinion on that
PC	On whether it contributes to, well it did contribute I suppose inasmuch as the people that wrote in The Northern Echo agreed with the sentiments expressed in that, in the post
BS	Okay
PC	I, right, I have no interest in sharing anything that, right my, [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
BS	Okay but, [REDACTED] do you think there's an issue there with sharing things, sharing opinions even if they are your own opinion, opinions that might then contribute to issues of discrimination continuing, do you think there should be some limits on what people can share
PC	But then who decides what the limits are
BS	Yeah well that's another question
PC	There's your problem right there. I mean it's freedom of information. It's all of that stuff as well isn't it. That if you're going to stop people having an opinion about things, as I say I haven't shared my opinion on this post. Others have shared their opinion on it
BS	Okay
PC	And as I, I mean, yeah my thoughts on the whole thing is that it's politically motivated by, they've made such a fuss of this because of politics not because of what the post actually said
BS	Okay so do you think that there should be any limits on what people are able to post
PC	Anything that is clearly racist. If you were to say something clearly against any, any member of society then, but then we get that all the time.

	We get that in the Council chamber. We're always being, people having a go at us and I don't know, I don't know how you can draw the line. I don't know who gets to draw the line or how you can do it and people can be offended by all sorts of things can't they when you tell them the bees are dying off they can be offended by that
BS	Okay so you've mentioned a few times about the comments in The Northern Echo. They're not something that I've seen so are you able to tell me what the sentiments of those comments were
PC	Oh I sent them to Luke. Has he not given you them
BS	I haven't seen them
PC	Oh okay
BS	Could we speak about them
PC	I'll tell you. I have, I copied them at the time
BS	Okay
PC	And I did a precis for him. She's making a point that you personally had no control over what your ancestors did in the past. The truth matters. Thank you for standing up for it. Pauline Culley is right. Slavery existed whether white or black throughout the ages. She has nothing to answer for. The post was factually correct. The Barbary slave trade was a huge issue at the time. She's quite right. I'm grossly offended and can't believe the Councillor's being criticised for telling the truth. History needs teaching alright all of it not the bits BLM and loony left want. The truth hurts. Absolutely agree. All minority factions are only out for a fight using the race card to justify it. They are certainly something. Sorry I'll get my glasses. I mean that was kind of the gist and then of course some people went further into it about the British Empire being the first state to abolish slavery. Destroying the slave trade of Sultan of Zanzibar
BS	Okay so
PC	It states fear not Councillor Culley. As you can see the vast majority of comments we're right behind you. When it comes to commies the more they complain the better the job we're doing. I mean again I have no comment to make on what people commented on that post
BS	Okay
PC	That's just their opinion

BS	Okay so that's their opinion. So from some of those comments there a lot of people have said that you're right. I think the word right came up a few times
PC	It did
BS	Yeah
PC	It did come up yeah
BS	Yeah. So from what
PC	I don't know what they thought I'm right about
BS	Well that was my question because from what we've discussed you suggested that you shared it more as a conversation starter rather than this is my opinion but it reads from those comments if people are thinking that that's your opinion
PC	Well that's because of how the article was written
BS	Okay
PC	So these are the comments underneath the article that was in the, that was in the paper and the article itself well it says about my lack of understanding of suffering elsewhere, that I displayed insensitivity claiming the Ward resembled a third world country. Now you see that one. That was also reported by The Echo the third world country thing but what I actually said was one of my residents had complained about it looking like, a resident who came to my Ward Surgery and was complaining about the grass. That's what I said and it was reported as me saying it cos I did say it but it wasn't me who actually said it so again it's, and it's all appeared to undermine, appeared to do this, appeared to do that. It is what it is
BS	Yeah so do you think that people have got the wrong end of the stick then and thought that this was your opinion when actually it wasn't necessarily your opinion. It was just something that you wanted to create a discussion about
PC	Very possibly. Possibly. Because yes I suppose if they've seen me share it but I have never commented on it. I've just shared, I shared it. Whether it's, I mean, and it's, it's somebody's opinion whether it's racist or it's inciting hatred or all the rest of the things. I don't know. I don't know.

	I don't, I don't think it's racist. I don't think it's offensive. I don't think it incites hatred and I don't think it's inflammatory
BS	Okay
PC	And neither do the people who have commented. It's not. The post itself is not racist. That's why I don't understand why we've ended up here
BS	Do you want to expand on that or say anything more about that
PC	No
BS	Do you want to expand on why you don't think it's racist or inflammatory
PC	It's a, well it's a factual, it's just a fact. What's written on it is a fact and I don't think any of the things that I've, that they say it is but other people may think that. It was not my opinion. I have never said anything about that post
BS	Okay
PC	I specifically didn't speak to The Echo and I didn't speak to the radio
BS	So you've mentioned there that other people will have different opinions about it and some people might
PC	Yeah
BS	Interpret it in a different way to how you have. Do you think that there's any risk that somebody from an ethnic minority living in Darlington might interpret that in a different way to how you have
PC	Well somebody who isn't from an ethnic minority may interpret differently to what I have. The ethnic minority part of it well it's, that, it's, people can be offended by just about anything that any politician says these days. People get offended by all sorts of things whether they're ethnic minorities or Liberal Democrats
BS	So if somebody did interpret it differently to how you have and was offended by it is there any possibility that that might prevent somebody from accessing Council services
PC	Why
BS	Well that's something that's been mentioned when I've discussed this with the other Councillors is that perhaps if you were from an ethnic minority and you were offended by that and did interpret it to be racist you might not feel as comfortable contacting the Council about something as you normally would if you hadn't seen that. Is that a possibility do you think

PC	Why, no. Why would that, why would that stop anybody who needed help from contacting the Council. You're back to then saying that it's racist. You're back to that. That's their view. It's not my view that it's racist
BS	Okay I appreciate that. I'm just trying to get your views on it
PC	Yeah yeah yeah. I know. I know sorry
BS	It's okay
PC	Just
BS	I know. I know it's difficult and I know I'm firing an awful lot of questions at you
PC	Yeah
BS	But I'm just trying to explore your thoughts on it as much as possible so that we can get as much down, as much information as we possibly can
PC	Yeah
BS	So leading on from the question, the last question I've asked, do you think that things that you post, not necessarily this but anything that you post on Facebook do you think that reflects back upon the Council as a whole or upon the other politicians in the Council
PC	That anything that I post reflects back. Not necessarily cos as I say the majority of things that I ever post are about bees and the library
BS	Okay
PC	And I have very few people who actually live in Mowden from however many friends on that site that I've got there's not that many of them in Mowden and it's people in Mowden who vote for me. Not some random person who lives in Kent or Middlesbrough
BS	Okay. So the (<i>connection issues</i>) views on this post if in some hypothetical circumstance in the future you or any other Councillor was to post something on Facebook that everybody agreed was offensive, that was very clearly outright offensive, would that reflect back on the Council as a whole do you think
PC	No. It would reflect back on the person who shared it
BS	Okay
PC	And their political party to some extent
BS	So do you think then that people in society understand about how it works with the Council having politicians from a wide range of different parties

	and that they all will have different views and that they're not necessarily reflective of what the Council as an organisation thinks. Do you think that people have a good understanding of that then
PC	I'm not sure that most people have any interest at all in politics or how the Council works or anything else. I'm not sure that they, that many people, I mean obviously there are some who do understand it and do follow it but the vast majority of people including members of my own family haven't got a clue
BS	Okay
PC	About how things work with the Council until they need something doing about the bins or something like that and then they become very interested. And as a Councillor I don't discriminate between people who didn't vote for me and people who did. You just try and help them all
BS	When you saw this post on Facebook did you kind of have much of a think about it before you reposted it or was it something that you did just instantly. I know you've said that you shared a lot of things on there. Did you just kind of think oh that's interesting I'll share it or did it kind of
PC	I can't remember
BS	Cross your mind whether there might be any controversy about it
PC	I can't remember. It was months ago
BS	So can you remember if you kind of gave any thought as to whether it might be more appropriate on your personal page rather than a public one
PC	I can't remember
BS	Okay. I'm coming to the end of my questions but the last thing that I had noted down that I wanted to ask you, am I right in thinking that the post itself has been deleted now
PC	I, yes I, so I shared this I don't know what day it was but the following day John Clare who is a Labour Councillor in Durham said, said something back to me that made me look and I thought oh I'll have a look see what it was he's talking about and I looked on his page and then I realised when I looked on his page that I was in for some abuse just from the messages that were on there so they were on about scoring points by publicising what I'd, this post that I'd done and I mean some of the stuff that the Labour Party do on there, they're just trolls. They are awful, awful

	<p>comments that they put on us being Tory scum being probably one of the mildest things that they do and I realised then that they were out to get, well to try and cause as much political trouble as possible by the, just by the posts that were on there. Now my children were also on, because I always spent more time on this site than on my personal site both my children were on there and I could, I've seen how they operate in the past and I thought I'm not having my children seeing me being vilified by them on this, on this post so I closed it down so that's, so that, well so that my kids didn't have to see that. I've seen what they do. They're awful yeah and then when I, when I then looked back later and I saw that they were just trying to, apparently they can get points for causing trouble for, well they've scored points in the past according to Helen Goodman who used to be the MP there. She got somebody fired and she was telling him to make sure that I got fired for this post and you just think no they're just gunning for me. I'll take it down which is what I did and then, then when I got the complaint I thought well I best leave it down until the investigation's over and then I'll start it up again at some point</p>
BS	Okay so is it the post that's come down or is it the whole page
PC	Page. I took the page down
BS	<p>Okay so finally I just wanted to come back to this point that the main concern that has been raised by a member of the public and the other politicians is that the post and the sharing of the post effectively shares an opinion which they feel could contribute to prejudice in society continuing. I know you've said that you don't necessarily want to give an opinion on that but that basically is the crux of the complaint so I wanted to give you a final opportunity on whether or not you wanted to say anything about that</p>
PC	So the post what say again please
BS	The post could contribute to any prejudice in society continuing. That the main views are that the post undermines the difficulties that black and ethnic minority people face as a legacy of the trans-Atlantic slave trade
PC	Does it
BS	Well that's what I'm asking. What's, that's what they've raised. What's your views on it if you wish to give me one

PC	You're back to that's their opinion and
BS	Yeah
PC	And from, just we're back to the comments in The Echo. They all had a different opinion to the one that the opposition Members and this member of the public have had. They are all a completely different view of that post so do you go with the majority or the minority of views on that particular post. I don't know. I suppose that's what you have to work out whether you're going to go with the majority or a minority
BS	Yeah but I just
PC	And whilst a minority needs a voice, minorities always need a voice you know yes you're back to it being their opinion of that post
BS	Yeah so I'm just, the purpose of that is I'm asking you, I'm putting to you their opinion and asking for yours on it. I'm not saying whether I agree with anybody's opinion. I'm just asking for your views on it. That's all
PC	Yeah yeah I get that. I get that. I don't think that post is racist or inciting hatred. The post itself
BS	Okay. Alright. Thank you
PC	And, but they are entitled to their view on it
BS	Okay. Thank you. I think that's everything that I wanted to ask unless there's anything else that you want to say or have on the record about any of this
PC	Yes I don't think I've got, I mean there's, I suppose it depends if it's actually going to go to a hearing cos then there will be other questions but I'm sure you'll be letting me know
BS	Okay
PC	When this is all typed up
BS	Okay so
PC	You see it's just a, it's a shame that it's come to this for something, you'll end up with nobody sharing any kind of, anything and I'm not sure that that's a good thing either if people aren't allowed an opinion on things
BS	Okay okay. Thank you very much. That was everything from me so thank you for your time today. I really do appreciate it and I'm sorry about how many questions I fired at you but I just really wanted to get a good sense of your views on this

PC	Okay. Well I hope you have. Let's hope
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