



Welcome to this week's edition of Defuse News

A weekly briefing for people whose profile attracts attention.

This is not the edition I had planned to send.

The death of Ann Widdecombe, and the flood of confident commentary that followed within hours, prompted me to write about something I spent years dealing with inside Parliament. What happens when assumptions get ahead of evidence, and why the discipline of waiting matters more than ever.

I hope it brings some calm to a noisy week.

Assumptions Are Not Evidence

What behavioural threat assessment can teach us about the death of Ann Widdecombe

The death of Ann Widdecombe is a tragedy.

Whatever your politics, a woman has lost her life, and those who knew and loved her are living through every family's worst nightmare.

♥ They deserve compassion before commentary.

Over the last few days, I have watched a familiar pattern emerge.

Before anyone could establish what happened, let alone why, many people had already decided.

📌 Some insist it must be another politically motivated attack, like those that claimed the lives of Jo Cox and Sir David Amess.

📌 Others are equally certain it was something else entirely.

At this stage, neither side knows, and the confidence with which both sides are arguing tells you more about them than about the case.

Events have already made the point once.

✅ A man arrested on suspicion of murder has been released and is no longer part of the investigation.

The first confident theory did not survive the weekend.

I spent years assessing threats against MPs after the murder of Jo Cox, building the specialist team in Parliament that did this work full time.

⚠️ **The greatest danger in any investigation is allowing assumptions to become facts.**

The human brain dislikes uncertainty, so we search for explanations that fit what we already believe. Psychologists call this confirmation bias. Investigators call it something to guard against, because once an inquiry starts looking for evidence to support a theory rather than testing the theory against the evidence, it has already gone wrong.

📱 Social media has changed the speed, not the standard of evidence

Social media has made this weakness industrial.

Over the past few days, confident theories have spread across LinkedIn and elsewhere, published by people with no access to the evidence and often no background in investigation.

Each post draws agreement from those who already share the writer's view, and every approving comment makes the theory feel more established.

**These echo chambers add nothing except certainty.
Nobody inside one has learned anything new.
They have heard themselves agreed with, and mistaken that for confirmation.**

The comparisons being made deserve careful thought

◆ **Jo Cox**

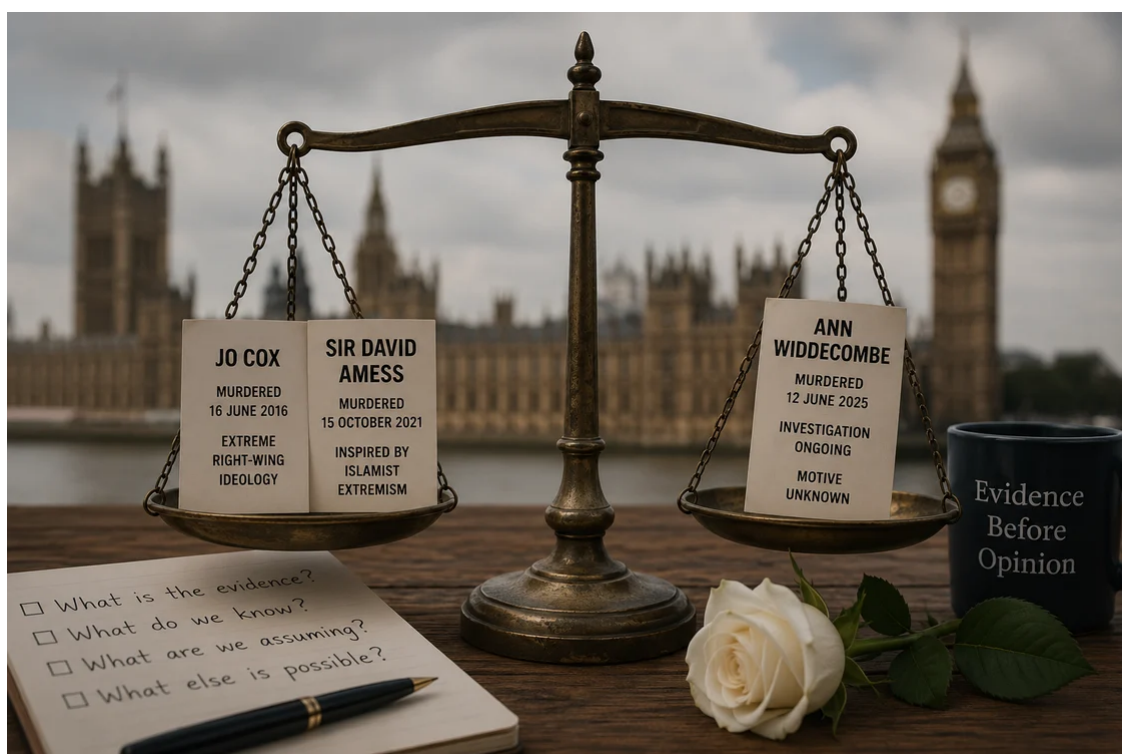
- Murdered by a man driven by extreme right-wing ideology.

◆ **Sir David Amess**

- Murdered by a man inspired by Islamist extremism.

The motivations and pathways were different.

What the two cases shared was that both victims were serving MPs, attacked in public while carrying out their constituency duties.



Here is something most commentators miss

📌 **Attacks on politicians are rarely personal.**

In my research on attacks against British MPs, the victim was nearly always targeted as a representative of the state, with the grievance driven by wider political events rather than anything the individual had said or done.

The attacker chooses a symbol.

Who the person actually is matters far less to them than what they represent.

Ann Widdecombe left Parliament sixteen years ago and was found dead at her home on Dartmoor.

I offer no conclusion from that.

I point it out because this is how behavioural threat assessment works.

Each case is examined on its own evidence, and the details that do not fit the familiar pattern are often the ones that matter most.



Good assessment starts with questions

Before reaching a conclusion, ask yourself:

- ? What do we actually know?**
- ? What are we assuming without realising it?**
- ? What other explanations remain possible, however uncomfortable or mundane?**

These are not signs of uncertainty. They are the habits of good judgement.

Asking them is how good investigations avoid becoming bad ones.

It is also, frankly, how good decisions get made in every field I have worked in.

Devon and Cornwall Police have said the case is not being treated as terrorism and that there is currently no information to suggest a politically motivated crime, while remaining open-minded as the inquiry continues.

Their senior officer has now asked people not to speculate about what might have happened, particularly on social media, because it risks harming the investigation and causes real distress to a grieving family.

That position may change if new evidence emerges.

Right now, nobody commenting online knows.

A final thought

Threats to public figures are real.

I have seen that first-hand, and I have spent my career helping people manage them.

They come from many places:

- • Ideology
- • Grievance
- • Obsession
- • Circumstances with no connection to public life at all

Treating every incident as proof of a wider political narrative helps nobody, least of all the victims.

 **It creates heat when what families, investigators and the public need is light.**

The best tribute we can pay Ann Widdecombe

The best tribute we can pay Ann Widdecombe is the courtesy we would want for anyone we loved.

- ✓ Let the investigation run.
- ✓ Draw conclusions afterwards.

Thank you for reading.



 **Know someone who would benefit from this briefing?**

Please send it to them.

Most people receive their first warning sign long before they receive any advice on what to do about it.

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Philip Grindell MSc CSyP

Founder & CEO, Defuse Global

Author of [Personal Threat Management: The Practitioner's Guide to Keeping Clients Safer](#)



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Contact us at info@defuseglobal.com

Defuse Ltd, 124 City Road, Old Street, London EC1V 2NX, United Kingdom, +44 02072930932

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