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Few convictions as threats against politicians rise
The Australian, Australia

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Few convictions as threats against politicians rise

ELIZABETH PIKE
SARAH ISON
LILY McCAFFREY

A fraction of reports about harassment and threatening behaviour towards politicians have led to criminal convictions in the past year, amid calls to address the "sentencing gap" between the offence and the punishment handed down by the courts. Australian Federal Police Commissioner Krissy Barrett on Wednesday said a national security investigation team charged one person a week for threatening parliamentarians and high-office holders.

However, charges have struggled to translate into jail time. In the past financial year, the AFP received 1067 reports of harassing, offensive and threatening behaviour towards office holders – a 92 per cent increase since 2020.

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Prison time dismissed as threats soar

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Australian Federal Police Commissioner Krissy Barrett on Wednesday said a national security investigations team charged one person a week for threatening parliamentarians and high-office holders. However, charges have struggled to translate into criminal convictions or jail time, despite repeated warnings about a rise in politically motivated violence.

In the last financial year, the AFP received 1067 reports of harassing, offensive and threatening behaviour towards politicians and office holders, marking a 92 per cent increase since 2020. And since October 2025, 41 people have been charged. Reports can fail to meet the threshold for an offence and they do not directly relate to charges.

But most charges did not result in jail time, with offenders handed "good behaviour" conditions or a community corrections order, alongside fines of up to $5000, according to an analysis of judgments from 2022 to last week.

Calls to address mounting reports of political violence come after MP Helen Haines was rammed by a car outside her electorate office on Monday.

Former Labor senator-turned independent Fatima Payman has referred "well over 100" threats to police, many of which have seen perpetrators face court. None of the cases have led to custodial sentences, with six matters currently before the courts. This week, was Senator Payman was told she should be "guilotened". Her staff also received a photo of human faeces by email on Wednesday.

Senator Payman called for action to improve the court process when it came to threats to MPs, revealing she had made multiple requests for a "public apology" in cases where judges noted the contrition of perpetrators.

In a case last month, police told Senator Payman's office a NSW man who pleaded guilty to three carriage service offences associated with emails sent earlier this year and had agreed to issue an apology, but this did not happen. "We've started asking at the start of cases to consider a public apology being ordered, so we can share it and stop this sort of thing being normalised," Senator Payman's spokeswoman said. "So far, that's not happened."

Threatening to cause harm to a public official carries a maximum penalty of seven years' imprisonment. Australian Strategic Policy Institute national security programs director John Coyne said the current sentencing regime was "not sufficient to deter this behaviour". "The courts are making a mistake here because what we are not equating in the sentencing is the impact these threats are having," Dr Coyne said. "We need to treat it more seriously, these threats are shaping the landscape of public policy. I do think it's impacting people and I think the courts have an obligation to take a look at this more closely – intention needs to be treated as an aggravating factor.

"These threats are having a chilling effect on our democracy and free speech. It is an attack on democracy."

Criminal offences exist at the state and federal level to protect public officials and many reports often fail to meet the criminal threshold, accounting for the gap between the number of reported threats and charges.

Last week, a 44-year-old Sydney man was sentenced to a two-

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year community corrections order and fined $1000 at Parramatta Local Court for making threatening phone calls to a high-office holder. he pleaded guilty after he made "multiple threats of violence" to the official.

Another Sydney man, aged 43, was sentenced last month to a 14-month order after he pleaded guilty to threatening a federal politician. A further two men from NSW, aged 31 and 42, were convicted and fined thousands of dollars for similar offences in August. The older man, from Queanbeyan, avoided a CCO or supervision order despite pleading guilty to threatening a federal MP and possessing two prohibited weapons, an extendible baton and a Taser.

In 2022, a 47-year-old West Australian was fined $5000 for making a threatening comment online towards a federal MP, where he linked the politician to a terrorist and said they would be murdered.

The strongest sentence handed down among these cases was given last month to a 57-year-old Queensland man, who received six months' imprisonment after he pleaded guilty to threatening to cause harm to a federal parliamentarian. However, the magistrate ordered he serve the sentence in the community, releasing him on a $3000 recognisance order to be of good behaviour for 18 months.

Charges have also been dropped against alleged offenders. Last October, Victoria Police withdrew burglary and property damage charges against an 18-year-old woman following a vandalism attack on the electorate office of Labor MP Josh Burns, one of the most high-profile Jewish MPs in federal parliament.

While sentencing outcomes are a matter for the courts, an AFP spokeswoman said: "Every report regarding the safety and security of a federal parliamentarian is taken seriously."

Ms Barrett said agencies had become "increasingly concerned" about the number of people being warned and charged for their online behaviour.

'These threats are having a chilling effect on our democracy and free speech'

JOHN COYNE
AUSTRALIAN STRATEGIC POLICY INSTITUTE

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