

The gatekeepers of public debate can't patronise away anti-Muslim bigotry

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A parliamentary group's proposal that the government define 'Islamophobia' is a misguided power grab, says Chris Sloggett. If we want to end anti-Muslim bigotry, we should stop telling people what to think about Islam.

In September a car driver, apparently egged on by three passengers, [drove](#) into a number of pedestrians outside a mosque in north London. Police said the vehicle hit "a number of pedestrians" and it was "extremely fortunate" nobody had died. Three people were injured.

A few weeks later a man from Lincoln [admitted](#) sending hundreds of letters around the country threatening Muslims during a sustained two-year campaign. These included threats of a 'Punish a Muslim day', with 'awards' offered for attacks on people and mosques.

Some of his letters contained white powder as a hoax poison. One letter to Muslim worshippers in Hull said they would be "slaughtered very soon". Another, to the University of Sheffield, said he would donate money to charity every time a Muslim was killed.

These are just a couple of the most highly publicised anti-Muslim crimes which have taken place in recent weeks.

These are attacks on Muslims' religious freedom. The perpetrators need to be dealt with and punished in accordance with the law. And society should seek to challenge the attitudes behind them.

So it's reasonable to assume good intentions lie behind yesterday's [report](#) from the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims, which calls on the government to adopt a definition of 'Islamophobia'. The report includes examples of anti-Muslim hate crimes which should be universally condemned: a mother attacked for wearing a hijab as she went to pick her children up from school; racists leaving pig's heads or bacon strips at mosque entrances; a man trying to kill a Muslim woman and girl. It also draws on the wider problem of anti-Muslim discrimination.

The report identifies a genuine problem. But unfortunately its proposals are likely to worsen it – and do so while restricting public discussion.

The report adopts the word 'Islamophobia', overriding the objections of the National Secular Society and groups such as Southall Black Sisters, which campaigns for the rights of women from minority groups. Unfortunately the term has now been normalised in public debate. Major press outlets use it with impunity and politicians appear to feel little shame using it. This has undermined rather than boosted minority rights. (For a better exploration of this topic readers should consult this nuanced and well-reasoned [blog](#) from Kenan Malik.)

The authors' decision to use the term 'Islamophobia' is instructive of their wider approach. At the report's launch on Tuesday afternoon Sayeeda Warsi, a prominent member of the APPG, acknowledged concerns over the term but said she was prepared to go along with it because the

Muslim 'community' preferred it.

The report consistently sides with contributors who claim to represent the 'community'. This may be a reflection of the influence of Warsi, who consistently claims to do the same, with minimal pushback in large chunks of the British press. Just last week in the House of Lords she [claimed](#) "British Muslim communities" were "fully supportive of any asylum claim Asia Bibi may have". On what authority she spoke for [3.4m](#) people, nobody made clear. It may also be a reflection of the thinking of Naz Shah, who claimed to "represent" the "community" on Tuesday.

The authors regularly pay lip service to the need to avoid shutting down criticism of religion. But siding with the ill-defined 'community' means dismissing concerns about free speech. At one point they write: "The right to free speech ends when words and actions begin to 'fuel hatred, violence and stimulate antagonistic responses which are at odds with the cohesive society'. Upon this concept, we heard that a definition of Islamophobia could perhaps be cognizant of the legal elements of 'intent' and 'recklessness' when determining the boundaries for policing free speech."

And they propose vague and unworkable plans which will in reality do exactly what they said they would not do.

The report says the government should make it policy that "Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness". "Expressions of Muslimness" can roughly be translated to mean Islamic practices. Why else would Tuesday's launch have heard that any definition of 'Islamophobia' must include instances of Ofsted questioning the wearing of the hijab by young girls in primary schools?

The report also gives a – non-exhaustive – series of examples of speech that could be officially declared 'Islamophobic'. Claiming that "Muslim identity" has "a unique propensity for terrorism" would be a "myth" which would apparently need to be shut down. Pointing out the link between Islam and terrorism is likely to become even less acceptable than it already is.

It also declares accusations that Muslims or Muslim majority states "invent or exaggerate Islamophobia", or accusations that Muslims are more loyal to the priorities of Muslims worldwide than their own countries, beyond the pale. Bigots may make these points for their own ends, but reasonable people may also ask how far there is some truth in them. And do the authors not think we should point out that Muslim theocracies push propaganda in an attempt to convince Muslims that British society hates them?

The APPG also approvingly cites five 'tests' to determine whether speech is 'Islamophobic':

- Does it stereotype Muslims by assuming they all think the same?
- Is it about Muslims or a dialogue with Muslims, which they would wish to join in?
- Is mutual learning possible?
- Is the language civil and contextually appropriate?
- Does the person doing the criticism really care about the issue or [are they] using it to attack Muslims?

There may be newspaper columns, reports from think tanks or comments made towards Muslims in the street which deserve criticism on some of these grounds. But as tests which could render some commentary beyond the bounds of public debate they are utterly unworkable. That is particularly so as the APPG suggests that if the answer to any of these questions is 'yes', the comment may constitute 'Islamophobia'.

Warsi herself seemed to imply that all Muslims think the same in the House of Lords last week. Muslim exceptionalists regularly suggest Muslims cannot possibly cope with other people being allowed to draw Muhammad or that Muslims cannot possibly eat meat from animals which have been stunned before slaughter. Do they get away with it because they are seen to be on the Muslim 'side'?

Why should non-Muslims not discuss Muslims? Is there any other group of people who do not get or should not get talked about? What 'mutual learning' are we expected to do when the Islamic practice or attitude in question is wrong and the person criticising it is right? Does the call for "civil" language mean blunt criticism is phobic?

How on earth can we read the mind of someone who says something critical to know whether they "really care about the issue"? Should we dismiss any criticism of non-stun slaughter that does not come from a vegetarian? On what grounds will those who advocate Muslim integration be allowed to speak at all?

And most importantly who will monitor the debate, deciding what is acceptable and what is not? At Tuesday's launch Liam Byrne MP called for changes in the law and court action against media outlets for "hate speech". The report regularly attacks the press and uncritically mentions that 'community' representatives have called for "accountability for media". Hidden within this report is a power grab.

And that power grab could reach into every area of British life, as the report repeatedly refers to the apparent problem of "institutional Islamophobia". This relativistic idea suggests the need for a wholesale change in British society to accommodate Muslims and lets Muslim culture off the hook for problems Muslims face. Would an employer, for example, be characterised as a phobe for refusing to promote or hire people who push their religion on their colleagues, or whose religion interferes with the quality of their work? It is already against the law to discriminate against people on the basis of their faith, for example in employment. So what else would need to change before we can stop calling British society 'institutionally Islamophobic'?

All-party parliamentary groups do not have any power to change the law or government policy. But the noises coming out of Westminster suggest this report could determine the rough parameters of acceptable public debate on Islam for years to come. At the launch the minister for faith Lord Bourne said the government was interested in taking the report further. Yvette Cooper, the chair of the home affairs select committee, was equally enthusiastic.

The government could do many things to address bigotry against Muslims and other religious groups. It could tackle the division of British schools along faith lines. It could face up to religious separatism and start enforcing the same laws for everyone, regardless of religion. That might also make an impact on intra-religious sectarianism (an issue which the APPG's report deliberately ducks). But these things are difficult and have a less obvious, gradual impact. It's easier to try to tell people what they may or may not say.

It's now routine for those in positions of power to try to patronise bigotry away. This year the NSS has taken up the case of Justice Haddon-Cave – the judge who [lectured](#) the Parsons Green bomber on the peacefulness of Islam and encouraged him to study the Koran in prison. The authorities have responded to this blatant violation of judicial neutrality with a collective [shrug](#) of the [shoulders](#). His comments have been ignored on the grounds that the British public must be lectured by their apparent betters on the wonderfulness of Islam. Meanwhile Haddon-Cave has been allowed to [repeat](#) his remarks almost verbatim as he wrapped up the trial of a man convicted of attempting to kill the prime minister.

Meanwhile it's becoming increasingly difficult to get on a train, turn on the TV or go to a bookshop without being patronised on Islam. A recently-launched poster campaign tells members of the public "it's not just offensive – it's an offence", reinforcing the message that the British public cannot be trusted to treat their fellow citizens who happen to have a different religion with respect.

Islamic terrorism only played a minor part in the recent series *Bodyguard*. Without wishing to ruin it for anyone who hasn't yet seen it, this six-part series which was entirely about terrorism and security largely steered clear of Islam and Muslims. At one point there was an attempt to frame a brown-skinned man for a terrorist act; this was presented unsympathetically as an unscrupulous tactic to play on anti-Muslim prejudice. But inevitably the show has still been criticised – including, unsurprisingly, [from Warsi](#) – on the basis that one character represented a "stereotypical" view of Muslim women.

And just this week it was reported that a novel about a suicide bomber who changes his mind after going to a library was pulled from publication amid mob outrage and cries of 'Islamophobia'. When *The Guardian* [reported](#) the story yesterday morning, it did not feature a single comment from anyone defending the right to publish the book. Did it occur to those writing and editing the story that this might be unreasonable censorship, restricting people's right to read the novel?

These silencing tactics do not work. The best approach to the thorny issues created by multiculturalism isn't to shut down debate; it is to change our whole approach and embrace free speech, with all its imperfections.

And that applies beyond the subject of Islam. Reading through the report it is clear that its authors have learnt from recent debates on anti-semitism. According to one of its examples it would be 'Islamophobic' to claim that the existence of "an independent Palestine or Kashmir is a terrorist endeavour". That has echoes of the furore over describing Israel's founding as inherently racist. In both cases bigots will hide behind the right to criticise ideologies. But official policy should err on the side of free speech. It is for civil society to expose intellectual dishonesty, defeat it and marginalise it.

The authors also cite existing restrictions on speech under counter-terrorism or counter-extremism legislation – for example, restrictions on speech which 'glorifies' terrorism – as a justification for restricting speech critical of Islam or Muslims. As the NSS has argued as part of the [Defend Free Speech](#) campaign, it's misguided to push vague official definitions in an attempt to make a problem go away.

We all have an interest in people's right to go about their daily business without being harassed or abused. We also all have an interest in the mutual right to speak freely and to be given the benefit of the doubt until we comprehensively show we do not deserve it.

The members of the APPG on British Muslims are just the latest to suggest these two aims are in opposition. But censorship creates resentment. Resentment generates bigotry. Ending censorship is one of a series of steps we can take to push bigots back to the fringes of society. If we want social harmony, we should put a bit of trust in our fellow citizens to speak and think freely.

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