



INDEPENDENT

The government's rejection of our Islamophobia definition is a revealing moment for the Conservative Party

Urgent action is required to stop a poison that is seeping into all parts of our country. We can start by accepting a definition that allows us to understand it

Anna Soubry | May 15, 2019

“Islamophobia is a real and growing problem in Britain. At its worst it leads to death. Mohammed Saleem in Birmingham and Mushin Ahmed from Rotherham were murdered in terrorist attacks motivated by Islamophobia. During Ramadan in 2017, Darren Osborne, a man radicalised by extreme far right ideas, drove his van into a group of Muslim worshippers leaving a mosque in north London killing an elderly worshipper, Makram Ali.

At the other end of the scale, everyday attacks and insults are common for too many members of Britain's 3 million strong Muslim community. Urgent action is required to stop the poison of Islamophobia that is seeping into all parts of our country. And we can start the work by accepting the definition that allows us to understand it.

The all party parliamentary group (APPG) on British Muslims which I co-chair with Labour's Wes Streeting MP has proposed the following definition: "Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness." It has been adopted by every political party (including the Scottish Conservative Party) bar the DUP and the national Conservative Party.

Our definition has accordingly been dismissed by the government. It's good enough for Ruth Davidson but not Theresa May.

The definition has won support from 750 Muslim organisations and institutions and from more than 80 academics. It's little surprise then that the refusal of the national Conservative Party to sign up to it is taken as further evidence the party has a “problem” with Muslims.

For over six months and as part of the widest consultation on the subject, the APPG heard from academics, parliamentarians, lawyers, community groups, victim groups and, arguably most importantly, individual British Muslims. Our determination to root a definition of Islamophobia

in the experiences of Muslims saw us hold evidence sessions in the heart of Muslim communities, in Manchester, Sheffield, Birmingham and London.

Listening to the experiences of British Muslims and others perceived to be Muslim, was eye opening. The scale of Islamophobia has been underestimated. We heard first hand of the multiple ways in which Islamophobia manifests itself and the damage it is doing to individuals and to communities.

There is a creeping acceptance beyond the alarming headlines, such as in March 2018 when an Islamophobic right-wing extremist group tried to organise a “Punish a Muslim Day”. The matter was debated in parliament and I urged the Home Office minister Victoria Atkins "that the time had come for a proper definition of Islamophobia” On behalf of the government her response was “we do not accept the need for a definitive definition”.

Over a year has gone by and now and we hear the government will instruct two advisors to define Islamophobia for Britain’s Muslims, when we have already done them the trouble by consulting Muslim communities and won widespread support for our definition.

The definition is built upon the framework from the IHRA definition of antisemitism with examples informed by the IHRA definition.

On Thursday, MPs from across the House of Commons will contribute to a discussion about our definition and the effects of Islamophobia on our British Muslim communities.

It remains to be seen if any colleague advances some of the criticisms of our Islamophobia definition that have been circulating. It’s claimed the definition "curtails free speech" or would allow "blasphemy laws via the back door". Such claims couldn't be further from the truth.

We can only assume that our critics have either not read or misunderstood our report. We have been adamant in our defence of free speech and rigorous debate. The definition doesn’t exclude criticism or condemnation of all or any part of the faith of Islam, its teachings and interpretations.

We know all too well from the antisemitism scandal that has engulfed the Labour Party that the views of victims and their community must never be marginalised but must always be respected and embraced.

The APPG on British Muslims is a rightly proud to have undertaken the consultation, sparked a lively and positive debate in settling on a definition of Islamophobia that has won support throughout the Muslim community.

The government should embrace it and then get on with rooting out Islamophobia in Britain. They could do no better than to start in rooting it out in the Conservative Party itself.

Anna Soubry is Change UK MP for Broxtowe

<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/islamophobia-conservative-party-theresa-may-islam-racism-a8915886.html>