

THE TIMES

LEADING ARTICLE

May 15 2019, 12:01am, The Times

The Times view of Islamophobia: Defining Hate



Hatred of Muslims is a vile social ill wholly equivalent to other forms of racism and bigotry. Britain is blessed with a large and thriving Muslim population, mainstream Muslim politicians, sporting heroes and entertainers. No quarter must be given to those who regard Muslims with suspicion because of their faith. The massacre at mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, in March stands as a reminder that hate acts against Muslims must be noted, taken seriously, and fought.

The all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims is keen for ministers to adopt a new definition of Islamophobia, which describes it as “a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness”. This is well-meaning, and has been adopted by Labour, the Liberal Democrats, and Sadiq Khan, the mayor of London. Yet, as a new report by the Policy Exchange think tank argues today, the definition is dangerously flawed.

Globally speaking, Britain is a fine country in which to be a member of any minority, yet no one could deny that anti-Muslim prejudice exists. Accusations of rampant Islamophobia in the Tory party, particularly, are long-running, with Mohammed Amin, chairman of the Conservative Muslim Forum, warning only yesterday in an article for the Conservative Home website that the party’s coping strategy was not working.

Yet, even as a word, “Islamophobia” is un- comfortably broad. Antisemitism, often deemed a parallel, invariably involves attacks on Jewish people, rather than Judaism as a faith. Islamophobia, by contrast, links bigotry towards a people and the criticism of Islam itself. The division is not always clear, but there are grave free-speech implications in allowing the scholarly or even casual critique of a religion to be defined as bigotry. Nor can it be called bigotry in most circumstances to express concerns over sexual segregation, enforced female modesty, female genital mutilation or ritual slaughter. The parliamentary group’s definition risks making it so.

In *The Times* today, a leaked letter shows that similar concerns worry police forces. Writing to Theresa May, Martin Hewitt, chairman of the National Police Chiefs’ Council, representing police forces, warns of problems with a focus on “Muslimness”. It could, he fears, justify hostility from some Muslims towards minority groups such as Ahmadis. Mr Hewitt also tells the prime minister that counterterrorism specialists worry that the definition could lead to judicial review of terror legislation, perhaps rendering even efforts to curb the distribution of extremist material technically Islamophobic. Representatives from counterterror policing, he notes, were not invited to give evidence to the parliamentary group.

Another leaked memo shows that the Government Equalities Office fears that the definition of Islamophobia as racial rather than religious hatred makes little sense, and will lead to legal tensions between the act and the definition. Policy Exchange suggests that the word “Islamophobia” itself has a “deeply problematic history” and notes that its use has been promoted by groups that seek laws against blasphemy. There has been no such law in England or Wales since 2008. It would be deeply regressive if one were now to arrive, focused only on one religion. A clearer definition is indeed needed, but not this one.