

## **THIS IS NOT THE WAY TO TACKLE ANTI-MUSLIM BIGOTRY**

**Toby Keynes, 14<sup>th</sup> June 2019**

On 2<sup>nd</sup> March, Federal Board unilaterally agreed the following Working Definition of Islamophobia, at the request of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims and Baroness Warsi:

*“We recommend the adoption of the following definition following widespread consultation with academics, lawyers, local and nationally elected officials, Muslim organisations, activists, campaigners, and local Muslim communities:*

***“Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness.”***

There was certainly no “widespread consultation”, or even warning of the proposal, within the party prior to this decision.

I and other members of the Humanists & Secularist Liberal Democrat committee first learned of it only three days beforehand – far too late for concerns to be raised and taken up effectively with Federal Board members.

The decision also managed to pre-empt the Policy Working Group on the Nature of Public Debate, which is just kicking off with a remit including “Extremely hostile online behaviour in debating public issues, especially towards minority groups” and “What a liberal approach to promoting open and fair public discussion and debate should be in these circumstances”.

That group could still provide an appropriate vehicle for the party to have a full, open and honest debate about how we should cope with anti-Muslim prejudice and behaviour, both within the party and in society, so that the party membership can reconsider this decision.

Meanwhile, the decision has already had a significant impact:

- because the definition is now party of the party’s procedures and codes of conduct;
- and because it is being used to put pressure on the Home Affairs Committee’s current Inquiry into Islamophobia, to adopt the term and definition and incorporate them into government regulations and legal codes.

But why does there need to be a debate?

Surely all liberals recognise that anti-Muslim bigotry and hatred exists - especially after the appalling atrocity in Christchurch.

The New Zealand attack is unequivocally condemned by every civilised person, just as we condemn all other acts of bigotry directed against Muslims.

We are united in this.

## **THE PROBLEM WITH “ISLAMOPHOBIA”**

But the fundamental problem here is that the word “Islamophobia” is not just concerned with identifying anti-Muslim abuse and bigotry; rather, it conflates this with criticism of Islam and Islamic practices.

This is reflected in almost every definition of “Islamophobia”, and they often start from the presumption that hostility towards Islamic practices leads to hostility towards Muslims, so that hostility towards an Islamic practice becomes an attack on Muslim.

For example: “a useful shorthand way of referring to dread or hatred of Islam – and, therefore, to fear or dislike of all or most Muslims” (Runnymede Trust, 1997, quoted in the [APPG Report](#), p.23).

The APPG definition clearly tries to avoid referring to “Islam” or “Islamism”, by inventing its own term: “expressions of Muslimness” – but this still actually means Islamic beliefs and practices.

And it still manages to avoid referring to the main victims of anti-Muslim bigotry: Muslims themselves.

Because the definition, like the term, starts from defending Islamic identity, beliefs and practices, rather than from defending Muslims as people, it comes into direct conflict with the rights and freedoms of those groups that are subject to abuse and discrimination within Muslim communities and households that practice oppressive and religiously conservative forms of Islam.

While many Muslim communities and households may be highly liberal, others express their beliefs through controlling and abusive practices directed against women, LGBT+ people, ex-Muslims and indeed other Muslim groups.

We may argue that such beliefs are not truly Islamic, that they are aberrations; but many millions of Muslims around the world see these as an essential expression of Islam, and of their Muslim identities.

This presents us with a fundamental problem, if we seek to defend “expressions of Muslimness”: it requires us to define what is Islamic, and therefore worthy of protection, and what is not.

There is lively disagreement – to put it mildly - within and among different Muslim groups about what it means to be a Muslim, and what practices are Muslim. For us or the state to pronounce on what is or is not a valid expression of Muslimness would be supreme arrogance.

Anyway, it should be immaterial whether a person’s beliefs are held by themselves alone or by billions of people around the world, and whether their beliefs are defined by some supposed authority as Muslim or not: freedom of religion or belief, and of expression, should be exactly the same whether they are or are not “truly Muslim”.

In any case, they cannot override the rights of women, of LGBT+ people and of ex-Muslims – most of all, the rights of those living in repressive, religiously conservative Muslim communities and households.

It is people who have rights, and those peoples’ rights that need to be defended, including the rights of freedom of religion or belief and of expression, where these do not conflict with or inhibit the rights and freedoms of others.

Where a cultural or religious practice comes into conflict with the rights and freedoms of other people, those peoples' rights and freedoms must always have primacy.

Where Muslims are attacked, abused or discriminated against for seeking to express their beliefs and their customs, what matters is that this is an attack on them and their rights as people who happen to be Muslims.

By adopting and endorsing the term and APPG definition, Federal Board have lent our party's support to a weapon that is used every day as a term of abuse against anyone who challenges any discriminatory, cruel or abusive behaviours associated with some communities: LGBT+ rights campaigners challenging homophobic hate preachers, women challenging Sharia councils that condone male-on-female violence within marriages, ex-Muslims highlighting the treatment they have experienced as "apostates". Even liberal and secular Muslims come under attack.

The APPG report recognises that it cannot brand all criticism of Islamism and religiously conservative Islamic practices as "Islamophobic". But it is wedded to the idea that free speech about religion should be constrained, so it has to find a yardstick to determine what free speech is permissible and what is not.

It is symptomatic of the fundamental problem with this approach that the APPG endorses "five tests" devised by Professor Tariq Modood, of the University of Bristol. Fail any one of these tests, and we "may be dealing with Islamophobia or anti-Muslim racism".

Every one of these five tests is subjective, meaning that any criticism of Islamic practices could be judged to fail them. The third, in particular, is deeply chilling:

*"3. Is mutual learning possible?*

*"For example, one may criticise some Muslims for sexual conservatism or puritanism but is one willing to listen to those Muslims who think that contemporary societies like Britain are over-sexualised and encourage sexually predatory and undignified behaviour?"*

(Quoted in the [APPG Report](#), p.36)

In other words, it is not legitimate to criticise anti-LGBT and misogynist bigotry unless one is willing to engage with the bigots.

Federal Board recognised that the APPG report had gone off the rails, and has not endorsed the report as a whole (apparently; as I write, the minutes have still not appeared).

But it has endorsed the definition.

Supporters of the definition, including Federal Board members, say that it clearly distinguishes between legitimate criticism and unacceptable abuse, so that it cannot present any sort of threat to free speech and open debate.

Unfortunately, that distinction simply isn't in the definition.

Anything that "targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness" could fall within it, without qualification.

As a “Working Definition” of what is unacceptable and what is not, the definition quite simply fails: it is a Working Definition that doesn’t work.

And this means that the definition does indeed present a real threat to free speech, and to anyone – including Muslims and ex-Muslims - who seeks to challenge abusive practices and beliefs that are widespread within some Muslim communities.

## **VOICES AGAINST “ISLAMOPHOBIA”**

That is why Sarah Khan, Lead Commissioner for Countering Extremism, writes as a Muslim woman that the definition [“is alarmingly ambiguous when it comes to those who are brave enough to speak out about Islamist extremists and Muslim hate groups.”](#)

It’s why Neil Basu, Britain’s most senior counter-terrorism policer officer, says that the definition “was designed to protect people like me” but that it [conflates race and religion and is far too broad.](#)

It’s why Fiyaz Mughal, former Director of Tell Mama, writes: [“We need to have less politics around the use of the term “Islamophobia” and more of a focus on supporting the victims of anti-Muslim hatred, and reducing the hate directed towards any group of people.”](#)

It’s why Yasmina Alibhai-Brown writes [“We need to be able to criticise Islam – any definition of Islamophobia must recognise that.”](#)

It’s why [Humanists UK](#), [Faith to Faithless](#), the [National Secular Society](#) and [LibDem Baroness Kishwer Falkner of Margravine](#) have all called on the Home Affairs Committee’s Inquiry into Islamophobia to reject the definition.

And why I joined a wide range of campaigners, including Muslims and ex-Muslims, minority womens’ groups, LGBT+ groups and other faith groups, to challenge the definition in the [Open Letter to Sajid Javed.](#)

## **ANTI-ISLAM - OR ANTI-MUSLIM?**

There is a better way, and it was expressed in the party’s policy on [Freedom of Expression in Europe and Beyond](#), which, unlike the Federal Board decision, was properly debated and passed by Conference in March 2015:

*“Conference reaffirms its commitment to tackling anti-Muslim hate, anti-Semitism and other forms of prejudice directed against people as individuals or groups.*

*“...In a free and open society no belief system or ideology should have any protection from criticism including satire and lampooning, and there is no basis for privileging religion over other forms of belief or ideology.”*

We should always uphold the right of Muslims to freedom of religion and belief, and to freedom of expression, where these do not impact on the rights and freedoms of other people.

But we should be clear that this approach applies equally to people of all religions or beliefs, and that it is people whose rights we defend: Christians, Muslims and Humanists, not Christianity, Islam or Humanism.

We should also reject abuse directed against people based on their religion or belief or cultural practices, just as with abuse based on ethnic origin, gender, sexual orientation, age or disability.

But, at the same time, we must be free to question and challenge those beliefs and practices, as long as we don't fall into personal abuse.

So the basic test that we should be applying here, and that we should be pursuing as policy, is not "Is it anti-Islamic?" but "Is it anti-Muslim?"

"Anti-Muslim" is a good term: it means what it says on the tin, it is in common usage – including in existing party policy - and it starts from the person, not from the religion or culture.

It is anti-Muslim to attack or abuse a person or a group of people because they are Muslim, or because they are perceived as Muslim.

It is anti-Muslim to attack a cultural practice because it is practiced by Muslims, or an institution because it is created by and for Muslims.

So, for example, it is anti-Muslim to attack or abuse a woman who is wearing a niqab or burka (a full-face veil), but it is not anti-Muslim to criticise veils as instruments of oppression that many Muslim women are pressured or forced to wear.

It is anti-Muslim to campaign against the building of a mosque because "we do not want Muslims worshipping here", but it is not anti-Muslim to argue that this is not the right place for a place of worship.

It is anti-Muslim to condemn a foreign government because their leaders are Muslim, but it is not anti-Muslim to condemn the actions and ideology of a foreign state and leader such as Turkey and President Erdogan.

Of course, you may disagree with this as an approach.

But this is a fundamental question of what is acceptable behaviour in our party and in society, and we need to be having this discussion as a party, rather than having a decision imposed on us by Federal Board.

The Policy Working Group on the Nature of Public Debate, a policy motion and a debate at Conference, may be just the right vehicles for that discussion.

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***The views expressed in this article are personal, and may not represent the views of HSLD.***