



Islamophobia definition “unfit for purpose”, say campaigners

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The National Secular Society has signed an open letter criticising the "uncritical and hasty adoption" of an all-party parliamentary group's proposed definition of 'Islamophobia'.

The letter says the definition proposed by the APPG on British Muslims, which has been adopted by several major political parties and local councils, is "unfit for purpose".

The letter, which is addressed to the home secretary Sajid Javid, calls on the government, political parties, local councils and other organisations to reject the definition.

The NSS's chief executive Stephen Evans was one of a diverse range of 44 campaigners, academics, writers and other public figures who signed the letter.



The signatories included representatives of the think tank Civitas, the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, the Network of Sikh Organisations and Christian Concern.

NSS honorary associates Richard Dawkins, Pragna Patel, Maajid Nawaz and Peter Tatchell were also among the signatories.

The APPG's definition, which was proposed in a report in November, says "Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness".

The Labour party, Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, the mayor of London and all five major political parties in Scotland are among those who have adopted the definition in recent months.

The government has come under pressure to adopt the definition. But on Wednesday a report published by *Buzzfeed* suggested the prime minister was planning to reject it.

The letter criticises the APPG's definition and argues that it "is being taken on without an adequate scrutiny or proper consideration of its negative consequences for freedom of expression, and academic or journalistic freedom".

It says the definition's adoption will "aggravate community tensions" and "inhibit free speech about matters of fundamental importance".

"We are concerned that allegations of Islamophobia will be, indeed already are being, used to effectively shield Islamic beliefs and even extremists from criticism, and that formalising this definition will result in it being employed effectively as something of a backdoor blasphemy law."

Explaining his decision to sign the letter, Mr Evans said: "The rush to adopt the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims' definition of Islamophobia is deeply concerning. Several political parties, councils and public bodies have waved this definition through without stopping to consider the way it will restrict important discussion and debate.

"We urge the government and public bodies generally not to follow suit. We must resist the urge to respond to anti-Muslim bigotry by going along with the censorious whims of some 'Muslim community leaders', chilling free expression and undermining social cohesion."

Emma Webb, director of the forum on integration, democracy and extremism at Civitas, said: "The APPG definition is being adopted without proper scrutiny by councils and political parties across the country. Its impact on freedom of speech, freedom to criticise Islam and Islamist ideology, academic freedom and counter-extremism and integration work would be dire.

"The definition poses a very real threat to our civil liberties. Islamophobia has been used in the past by people who wish to censor those with whom they disagree – journalists, politicians, academics and public figures.

"Its adoption will have a chilling effect on free speech and will undoubtedly shut down important conversations that a healthy free society must have. It will only be counterproductive."

The NSS campaigns for freedom of expression on religious issues and has played a leading role in resisting the drive to adopt the APPG's Islamophobia definition.

Its submission to the home affairs select committee's ongoing Islamophobia inquiry argued that efforts to silence or stifle criticisms of Islam would be deleterious to free speech and counterproductive to social cohesion.

In December the NSS coordinated another letter urging the home secretary not to adopt the definition.

Last week a report from the Policy Exchange think tank, co-authored by a former head of counter-terrorism at Scotland Yard, said the adoption of the definition would "cripple" efforts to fight terrorism.

And this week the chair of the National Police Chiefs' Council, Martin Hewitt, also said the adoption of the definition could hinder counter-terrorism efforts.

A parliamentary debate on anti-Muslim prejudice is due to be held on Thursday.

Open Letter: APPG Islamophobia Definition Threatens Civil Liberties

Addressed to the Home Secretary Sajid Javid

The APPG on British Muslims' definition of Islamophobia has now been adopted by the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats Federal board, Plaid Cymru and the Mayor of London, as well as several local councils. All of this is occurring before the Home Affairs Select Committee has been able to assess the evidence for and against the adoption of the definition nationally.

Meanwhile the Conservatives are having their own debate about rooting out Islamophobia from the party.

According to the APPG definition, "Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness".

With this definition in hand, it is perhaps no surprise that following the horrific attack on a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, some place responsibility for the atrocity on the pens of journalists and academics who have criticised Islamic beliefs and practices, commented on or investigated Islamist extremism.

The undersigned unequivocally, unreservedly and emphatically condemn acts of violence against Muslims, and recognise the urgent need to deal with anti-Muslim hatred. However, we are extremely concerned about the uncritical and hasty adoption of the APPG's definition of Islamophobia.

This vague and expansive definition is being taken on without an adequate scrutiny or proper consideration of its negative consequences for freedom of expression, and academic and journalistic freedom. The definition will also undermine social cohesion – fuelling the very bigotry against Muslims which it is designed to prevent.

We are concerned that allegations of Islamophobia will be, indeed already are being, used to effectively shield Islamic beliefs and even extremists from criticism, and that formalising this definition will result in it being employed effectively as something of a backdoor blasphemy law.

The accusation of Islamophobia has already been used against those opposing religious and gender segregation in education, the hijab, halal slaughter on the grounds of animal welfare, LGBT rights campaigners opposing Muslim views on homosexuality, ex-Muslims and feminists opposing Islamic views and practices relating to women, as well as those concerned about the issue of grooming gangs. It has been used against journalists who investigate Islamism, Muslims working in counter-extremism, schools and Ofsted for resisting conservative religious pressure and enforcing gender equality.

Evidently abuse, harmful practices, or the activities of groups and individuals which promote ideas contrary to British values are far more likely to go unreported as a result of fear of being called Islamophobic. This will only increase if the APPG definition is formally adopted in law.

We are concerned that the definition will be used to shut down legitimate criticism and investigation. While the APPG authors have assured that it does not wish to infringe free speech, the entire content of the report, the definition itself, and early signs of how it would be used, suggest that it certainly would. Civil liberties should not be treated as an afterthought in the effort to tackle anti-Muslim prejudice.

The conflation of race and religion employed under the confused concept of 'cultural racism' expands the definition beyond anti-Muslim hatred to include 'illegitimate' criticism of the Islamic religion. The concept of Muslimness can effectively be transferred to Muslim practices and beliefs, allowing the report to claim that criticism of Islam is instrumentalised to *hurt* Muslims.

No religion should be given special protection against criticism. Like anti-Sikh, anti-Christian, or anti-Hindu hatred, we believe the term anti-Muslim hatred is more appropriate and less likely to infringe on free speech. A proliferation of 'phobias' is not desirable, as already stated by Sikh and Christian organisations who recognise the importance of free discussion about their beliefs.

Current legislative provisions are sufficient, as the law already protects individuals against attacks and unlawful discrimination on the basis of their religion. Rather than helping, this definition is likely to create a climate of self-censorship whereby people are fearful of criticising Islam and Islamic beliefs. It will therefore effectively shut down open discussions about matters of public interest. It will only aggravate community tensions further and is therefore no long term solution.

If this definition is adopted the government will likely turn to self-appointed 'representatives of the community' to define 'Muslimness'. This is clearly open to abuse. The APPG already entirely overlooked Muslims who are often considered to be "insufficiently Muslim" by other Muslims, moderates, liberals, reformers and the Ahmadiyyah, who often suffer persecution and violence at the hands of other Muslims.

For all these reasons, the APPG definition of Islamophobia is deeply problematic and unfit for purpose. Acceptance of this definition will only serve to aggravate community tensions and to inhibit free speech about matters of fundamental importance. We urge the government, political parties, local councils and other organisations to reject this flawed proposed definition.

Emma Webb, Civitas

Hardeep Singh, Network of Sikh Organisations (NSOUK)

Lord Singh of Wimbledon

Tim Dieppe, Christian Concern

Stephen Evans, National Secular Society (NSS)

Sadia Hameed, Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain (CEMB)

Prof. Paul Cliteur, candidate for the Dutch Senate, Professor of Law, University of Leiden

Brendan O'Neill, Editor of Spiked

Maajid Nawaz, Founder, Quilliam International

Rt. Rev'd Dr Gavin Ashenden

Pragna Patel, director of Southall Black Sisters

Professor Richard Dawkins

Rahila Gupta, author and Journalist

Peter Whittle, founder and director of New Culture Forum

Trupti Patel, President of Hindu Forum of Britain

Dr Lakshmi Vyas, President Hindu Forum of Europe

Harsha Shukla MBE, President Hindu Council of North UK

Tarang Shelat, President Hindu Council of Birmingham

Ashvin Patel, Chairman, Hindu Forum (Walsall)

Ana Gonzalez, partner at Wilson Solicitors LLP

Baron Desai of Clement Danes

Baroness Cox of Queensbury

Lord Alton of Liverpool

Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali

Ade Omooba MBE, Co-Chair National Church Leaders Forum (NCLF)

Wilson Chowdhry, British Pakistani Christian Association
Ashish Joshi, Sikh Media Monitoring Group
Satish K Sharma, National Council of Hindu Temples
Rumy Hasan, Academic and author
Amina Lone, Co-Director, Social Action and Research Foundation
Peter Tatchell, Peter Tatchell Foundation
Seyran Ates, Imam
Gina Khan, One Law for All
Mohammed Amin MBE
Baroness D'Souza
Michael Mosbacher, Acting Editor, Standpoint Magazine
Lisa-Marie Taylor, CEO FiLiA
Julie Bindel, journalist and feminist campaigner
Dr Adrian Hilton, academic
Neil Anderson, academic
Tom Holland, historian
Toby Keynes
Prof. Dr. Bassam Tibi, Professor Emeritus for International Relations, University of
Goettingen
Dr Stephen Law, philosopher and author

<https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2019/05/islamophobia-definition-unfit-for-purpose-say-campaigners>