

Free Speech Union briefing

Banning Islamophobia: Blasphemy Law by the Backdoor

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Foreword

By Richard Dawkins

A phobia is an irrational fear, as in claustrophobia, agoraphobia or arachnophobia, all conditions deserving of sympathy. But fear can be rational too. An infantryman in a First World War trench would have every reason to fear going over the top. To accuse him of phobia would be uncharitable, to say the least. An Australian suspected of arachnophobia might point out that spiders with a dangerous bite are not rare. In Britain there's much less to fear from spiders, so my fear of them could fairly be called arachnophobia. Is there a group of people who, like Australians in the case of spiders, have good reason to fear Islam? If such a group exists, I suggest it would be found among Muslims themselves.

A gay Muslim living in an Islamic country might have reasonable misgivings. There are nine Muslim countries in which consensual homosexuality carries the death penalty. A Muslim woman in Iran might reasonably fear being arrested by the Morality Police for showing a tendril of hair. In Pakistan or Britain she might fear violent reprisals from her father, uncles or brothers if she's suspected of consorting with an unsuitable man. In Somalia, a girl might reasonably fear older female relatives who intend to hold her down and take a razorblade to her clitoris. Not phobia, just justifiable fear. In Saudi Arabia, an unmarried adulterer might reasonably fear the prescribed 100 lashes, while a married adulterer can expect the death penalty.

In Britain, phobia is hardly the right word for any fear Salman Rushdie might feel. Sir Iqbal Sacranie, the former Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain, said, "Death, perhaps, is a bit too easy for him. His mind must be tormented for the rest of his life unless he asks for forgiveness to Almighty Allah." A Muslim who is losing his faith would have good reason to fear the penalty for apostasy, which is death. When I taxed Sir Iqbal with this on television, he said, "It's very rarely enforced." That's good to hear, but a would-be apostate doesn't have to be phobic to still feel a reasonable fear.

The All Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslim's definition of Islamophobia begins with the statement that it's a form of racism. Tim Dieppe makes the obvious point that Islam is not a race, and he very well develops the inconsistencies that this remarkable solecism leads to. I'd make one further observation. A religion is something you can convert to, or opt out of. Your race isn't like that. You can't convert to a race or leave it. (That's if race is a meaningful concept at all. The point is controversial, but presumably the authors of the APPG report on Islamophobia think it is or they couldn't talk about racism.) The fact that you can't leave your race means that, if Islam is indeed a race, apostasy is literally impossible. Yet apostasy has to be possible in Islam or it couldn't be punishable by death. So the statement that Islamophobia is a form of racism is more than just incorrect. It contradicts a fundamental, and incidentally obnoxious, tenet of Islam.

In this brief Introduction I have not considered the issue of freedom of speech. Tim Dieppe covers it so well that I have nothing to add. Except this final thought. If 'Islamophobia' becomes punishable by law, will it be illegal to even state as a matter of fact that a woman in some Islamic countries can be stoned to death for the crime of speaking to a man other than her husband? Will I be arrested for stating the undeniable fact that apostasy carries the death penalty? If so, bring it on. I look forward to defending myself in court.

Executive Summary

This report argues that any attempt to define 'Islamophobia' poses a threat to freedom of speech. In particular, a definition that has been widely adopted by political parties and other organisations defines 'Islamophobia' so broadly that free speech is clearly inhibited. It has been proposed that the government also adopt this definition. Attempts to define Islamophobia should be dropped, including and especially by the government, political parties and local authorities. As Kemi Badenoch recently pointed out, the Labour Party's adoption of this definition risks creating a "blasphemy law via the back door".¹

People in a free society must be free to criticise, question and even ridicule any belief or practice, including religious beliefs. The promotion of the concept of 'Islamophobia' risks silencing or censoring criticism of one religion above others. Acknowledging this is not tantamount to supporting irrational prejudice against Muslims.

A November 2018 report by the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims urged the government to adopt a legal definition of Islamophobia:

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

This definition was rapidly taken up by institutions including the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, the SNP, the Scottish Conservatives, Plaid Cymru and the Scottish Greens. Members of these parties who fall foul of the definition risk being sanctioned: indeed, this is already happening. Others who have endorsed the definition include 52 local councils in England (15.6% of the total), five Welsh councils (22.7%), eight local authorities in Scotland (24%), as well as over 30 MPs and dozens of academics. The suspension of Sir Trevor Phillips from the Labour Party in 2020-21 demonstrates how formal acceptance of the APPG definition by political parties serves to restrict freedom of speech. The suspension

¹ <https://twitter.com/KemiBadenoch/status/1761856858220798395?s=20>

involved a confidential 11-page indictment and a meeting behind closed doors which Phillips was barred from attending.

The APPG report claims that its aim is not “to curtail free speech or criticism of Islam as a religion”, but its proposals nonetheless pose a threat to free speech. Indeed, the report implies that some criticisms of Islam might be out of bounds altogether:

...the recourse [to] a *supposed* right to criticise Islam results in nothing more than another subtle form of anti-Muslim racism...
[our italics]

The report aims to broaden the definition of racism to include ‘cultural racism’, thereby inhibiting discussion of cultural practices. It also threatens the teaching of history: Islamophobia, we’re told, includes “claims of Muslims spreading Islam by the sword or subjugating minority groups under their rule”, which could, for instance, rule out criticising the actions of Boko Haram or Hamas. Even accusing Muslim majority states of exaggerating a genocide makes you an Islamophobe, meaning anyone who questions the Hamas government’s description of Israel’s military operation in Gaza as a ‘genocide’ is, according to the APPG definition, Islamophobic. Finally, it is a threat to press freedom in that journalists reporting on Islamic related stories are frequently accused of ‘Islamophobia’ and pressured to avoid covering Islamic aspects of news stories.

Defining ‘Islamophobia’ too broadly is a threat to free speech for non-Muslims and Muslims alike. The APPG definition in particular is not fit for purpose and should be dropped by those who have adopted it. In a free society, we must be free to debate and criticise any and all beliefs.

Introduction

This essay argues that allegations of 'Islamophobia' increasingly pose a threat to freedom of speech. In particular, a definition that has been widely adopted by political parties and other organisations defines 'Islamophobia' so broadly that it clearly inhibits free speech among their members. This is demonstrated by its use in practice as well as in theory. Proponents argue that the government should also formally adopt this definition.

People in a free society must be able to criticise each other's beliefs and practices. This necessarily includes religious beliefs and practices. The beliefs and practices of all religions and worldviews should be open to public scrutiny and people should be free to question, criticise, ridicule or joke about them. But the widespread acceptance of a too-broad definition of 'Islamophobia' risks silencing or censoring criticism of Islam. It is therefore a threat to free speech.

There are people who harbour irrational prejudice against Muslims. In criticising a particular definition of 'Islamophobia' I'm not defending this prejudice. Muslim people are entitled to equal opportunities, equal treatment and equal rights.

However, criticism of Islam is not the same as criticism of Muslims. Part of the purpose of this essay is to make clear that the two should be differentiated. Striking a believer, for example, is a crime; debating her beliefs is a right. Confusing the two risks shutting down debate and stifling free speech.

The government, and society as a whole, should be wary of attempts to define 'Islamophobia' in general, and the APPG definition in particular. Free speech is already being curtailed by these attempts, and further adoption of such definitions is likely to further curtail free speech. Attempts to define 'Islamophobia' should be abandoned and replaced by the phrase 'anti-Muslim hatred'. I'm not arguing that 'anti-Muslim hatred' should be proscribed by law, merely pointing out that as a concept it would be sufficient to describe the speech that those who use the term 'Islamophobia' object to. [The Network of Sikh Organisations](#) made the same point in its

submission to the Home Affairs Islamophobia inquiry:

We are of the view that 'anti-Muslim' hatred, (like 'anti-Sikh' or 'anti-Hindu') is much clearer language to describe hate crime specifically against the Muslim community. We previously expressed this in written evidence to the APPG on British Muslims inquiry into a working definition of Islamophobia/anti-Muslim hatred.

This essay calls on the government not to adopt a formal definition of 'Islamophobia', and on political parties, local authorities and other groups to abandon the proposed APPG definition. The stakes are high. No religion should obtain a privileged position in society by preventing open criticism of its beliefs or practices. This is harmful to the functioning of a free and democratic society.

The Origins of the Term

French philosopher Pascal Bruckner points out that the term 'Islamophobia' was first used by colonial officials in the 19th century.² French official Andrée Quélien, writing in 1910, denounced both 'Islamophobia' and 'Islamophilia', and called for an objective view of Islam and Islamic practices. Another French official, Maurice Delafosse also criticised both 'Islamophobia' and 'Islamophilia'.

Bruckner argues that after the Iranian revolution of 1980, the term 'Islamophobia' "underwent a mutation that weaponized it".³ Bruckner describes this as a "lexical rejuvenation" which aims at stigmatising criticism of Islam. French [sources](#) cite Ayatollah Khomeini describing Iranian women who rejected wearing the veil as being 'Islamophobic'.

In the UK, [Dr Zaki Badawi and Fuad Nahdi](#) both claimed to have coined the term 'Islamophobia' in testimony to a House of Lords Select Committee. The first known use of the word in print in the UK was by [Tariq Modood](#) in a book review published in *The Independent* on 16th December 1991 in which he discussed the view that *The Satanic Verses* was "a deliberate, mercenary act of Islamophobia". Modood indicated that his own view was that "while Islamophobia is certainly at work, the real sickness is militant irreverence". It is instructive to note that in this case what is 'Islamophobic' is the content of a novel which does not actually formally reference Islam, though it can be taken as a [satirical account](#) of the origins of Islam.

The term 'Islamophobia' gained significant profile and attention with the publication in 1997 of a report by the Runnymede Trust. Sir Trevor Phillips was then the chairman of the Runnymede Trust (the term has subsequently been used against him, as we discuss below). In his Foreword to the Runnymede report, [Professor Gordon Conway](#) wrote of a previous consultation paper published earlier in 1997, explaining:

We did not coin the term Islamophobia. It was already in use among

² Paul Bruckner. 'An Imaginary Racism: Islamophobia and Guilt.' Wiley. 2018, pp.2-5.

³ Ibid., 3.

sections of the Muslim community as a term describing the prejudice and discrimination which they experience in their everyday lives. For some of us on the Commission it was a new term, a rather ugly term, and we were not sure how it would be received.

There was also an important admission:

The term is not, admittedly, ideal. Critics of it consider that its use panders to what they call political correctness, that it stifles legitimate criticism of Islam, and that it demonises and stigmatises anyone who wishes to engage in such criticism.

Indeed, the recent proposed definition of 'Islamophobia' has evolved in exactly the way the critics predicted. It is interesting to note how, even then, an attempted definition subtly conflated fear and criticism of Islam with fear of all or most Muslims. This is precisely the type of conflation which we encounter in current attempts to define the term. The Runnymede report bluntly stated:

The term Islamophobia refers to unfounded hostility towards Islam.

This summary definition clearly references Islam the religion, not Muslims the people. Presumably, then, to avoid being Islamophobic one would need to have some foundation for hostility towards Islam, although the implication is that such blanket hostility would always be 'unfounded'. Even at this stage, then, there was an implication that you needed to agree or sympathise with Islamic teaching – or at least not criticise it – to avoid falling foul of the term.

But we are jumping ahead of ourselves. It is time to look at the APPG definition.

Islamophobia Defined

In November 2018, the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims released a report called [Islamophobia Defined](#), urging the government to adopt a legal definition of Islamophobia.

The proposed definition from the APPG is as follows:

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

In the Foreword to the report, Anna Soubry and Wes Streeting, Co-chairs of the APPG on British Muslims, write:

We hope our working definition will be adopted by Government, statutory agencies, civil society organisations and principally, British Muslim communities who have been central to this enterprise and whose valuable contributions have significantly shaped our thinking on this subject.

The report claims that “the aim of establishing a working definition of Islamophobia has neither been motivated by, nor is intended to curtail, free speech or criticism of Islam as a religion”. It further states:

Criticism of religion is a fundamental right in an open society and is enshrined in our commitment to freedom of speech.

This is encouraging, but when we delve into the vagueness and ambiguity of the definition and the examples cited in the report, the commitment to free speech seems to disappear.

Adoption of the Definition

The APPG definition was rapidly adopted by many institutions. So broadly was it taken up, in fact, that it seems many people were waiting for someone to propose a definition which they could swiftly adopt. Of greatest concern

is the formal adoption of it by political parties. Labour, the Liberal Democrats, the Green Party, the Scottish National Party, the Scottish Conservatives, Plaid Cymru and the Scottish Greens have all formally adopted the definition. This means that members of any of these parties who say something which could fall foul of the definition risk being sanctioned. As we shall see, this has already started to happen.

A dedicated [website](#) lists the various parliamentarians, groups and academics that have endorsed the definition. The website also lists over 30 MPs who have endorsed the definition as well as dozens of academics and Islamic organisations. Freedom of Information requests carried out by Hardeep Singh for a [Civitas report](#) found that 52 councils in England have adopted the APPG definition (15.6% of the total). Additionally, many Welsh councils have adopted it (22.7%), as have eight Scottish local authorities (24%). Councillors in these areas, or indeed council workers, could face sanctions for saying something that falls foul of the definition.

Perhaps most notably, the dedicated website for the definition originally featured a [fatwa](#) on the necessity of endorsing the definition of Islamophobia. The *fatwa* cites Islamic texts to justify supporting the definition. It [states](#):

According to the principles of the higher objectives of the Sharia, 'the crux of the matter is the signified, not the signifier' (al-'ibrat bi-l-musammayāt lā bi-l-asmā'); in other words, we should not be arguing over technical details relating to the definition but rather concern ourselves with the essence, i.e., what service the definition might do for the Ummah.

The 'Ummah' is the global Muslim community. The *fatwa* also appears to imply that Muslims should not argue over technical details but consider whether the definition will serve the Ummah. This *fatwa* concludes that the proposed definition will indeed serve the Ummah, therefore implying an obligation on Muslims to support it.

Threats to Free Speech

There are multiple problems with this definition, which is already curbing free speech in some contexts. It is worth examining these issues in some detail.

'Islam' is not defined

There is no attempt to define 'Islam' or 'Muslimness' in the APPG report. The report is a 70-page discussion about defining 'Islamophobia' which makes no attempt to state what 'Islam' actually is. Therefore, we do not know what it is that people are accused of being 'phobic' of. This makes the definition of 'Islamophobia' vulnerable to people who may want to define 'Islam' in a particular way. For example, some Muslims would regard it as 'Islamophobic' to claim that Islam discriminates against women, whereas others would not disagree with this claim. Similarly, many Muslims would say it is 'Islamophobic' to claim that Islam teaches about violent jihad, whereas others would openly state that this is what it teaches. There are many widely differing interpretations of Islam. Is criticism of any or every interpretation equally 'Islamophobic'? Who decides precisely what is or is not 'Islamic'? If the meaning of 'Islam' is open-ended then it evades public scrutiny and accountability and means one cannot know in advance what will be considered 'Islamophobic'.

Conflation of the religion with the people

It is one thing to criticise a religion or the beliefs and practices of a religion and another to discriminate against adherents of that religion. The definition of 'Islamophobia' immediately conflates the religion of Islam with Muslim people and makes this into an issue of 'Muslimness'. However, if the concern of the report is really Muslims as people, then it would be better to make that clear. It may have been more useful for the report to discuss the term 'Muslimophobia', which would at least make clear that it did not seek to prohibit criticism of a religion, but rather irrational discrimination

against Muslims. This could also be described as 'anti-Muslim discrimination'. Using the word 'Islamophobia' will inevitably result in people concluding that they cannot criticise Islam without being accused of being 'Islamophobic'. We should aim to avoid this conflation by using a different term.

'Perceived Muslimness' is too vague

The definition of 'Islamophobia' hinges on 'Muslimness'. Just what 'Muslimness' means is left undefined, perhaps deliberately so. In fact, the definition is actually rooted in 'perceived Muslimness', which is entirely subjective. It is not even clear who is doing the perceiving. Is it the victim or the perpetrator? For the definition to hinge entirely on subjective perception in this way is unacceptable. This means there is no way of knowing in advance whether something will be deemed 'Islamophobic' or not. What matters is whether someone *perceives* it to be so.

For example, a [Freedom of Information request](#) in 2017 found that as many as 25% of 'Islamophobic hate crimes' recorded by the Metropolitan Police are committed against non-Muslims or people of unknown faith. Some of the victims were Hindus, atheists, Christians, Sikhs and even Jews. Does this make sense? Can one be Islamophobic towards a non-Muslim? If the definition hinges on perception, then presumably the answer is yes.

Is 'perception' determined by appearance? If so, then one could only be Islamophobic towards someone who *looks* like a Muslim. But not all Muslims wear distinctive clothing. Both 'Islam' and 'Muslimness' are left undefined but the use of this term as endorsed by the report certainly extends beyond appearance.

Furthermore, hard-line groups sometimes define 'Muslimness' quite narrowly. [Dame Sara Khan](#), head of the Commission for Countering Extremism, has written:

A narrow understanding of 'Muslimness' leaves behind those Muslims who, because of how they choose to live their lives or practise their religion, don't have a 'Muslimness' that other Muslims find acceptable.

Does this mean that a Muslim who decides not to wear a *hijab* is being

Islamophobic, as the Ayatollah Khomeini maintained? What about someone who abandons the religion and converts to Christianity or atheism? Is that an Islamophobic act? Rooting the definition in perception could allow these actions to be described as 'Islamophobic'.

However, other interpretations of the definition would make it impossible for a Muslim to be Islamophobic. Is that how such a definition should work? [Sara Khan](#) comments on attempts by some Muslims to police the behaviour of others:

In our own country, the abuse, vilification and hostility towards Ahmadiyyah Muslims by other Muslims is a case in point. Other Muslims boycott Ahmadiyyah businesses and restaurants, bully Ahmadiyyah children at school, and distribute leaflets calling for their death. If this abuse was experienced by Muslims at the hands of non-Muslims, it would be perceived as anti-Muslim hatred; why should it be any different just because the perpetrators are Muslims themselves?

She writes, "An inclusive attempt to define Islamophobia must address this." But this kind of behaviour is studiously ignored in the report and anti-Muslim actions by other Muslims are not addressed.

Islam is not a race

The definition starts by saying: "Islamophobia is rooted in racism." The aim is clearly for 'Islamophobia' to be seen as a type of racism. But [Islam is not a race](#). It is a religion. People from all kinds of ethnic backgrounds are Muslims. Muslims do not see themselves as anything like a separate race. This is clearly a wrongheaded way to define 'Islamophobia'.

Even if Islam was a 'racial' religion, restricted to a particular ethnic group, criticism of the beliefs and practices of this religion should still be allowed in a free and open society. Defining 'Islamophobia' as a "type of racism" is clearly an attempt to stigmatise any criticism of Islamic beliefs or practices as racist.

Freedom to criticise and even ridicule religious beliefs and practices is protected by a hard-won amendment to the Public Order Act 1986. Section 29J, known as the [Waddington Amendment](#), reads as follows:

Protection of freedom of expression

Nothing in this Part shall be read or given effect in a way which prohibits or restricts discussion, criticism or expressions of antipathy, dislike, ridicule, insult or abuse of particular religions or the beliefs or practices of their adherents, or of any other belief system or the beliefs or practices of its adherents, or proselytising or urging adherents of a different religion or belief system to cease practising their religion or belief system.

This is very strong [protection for free speech](#) in relation to religious belief. People can be persuaded to change their religion and there should be strong protections in law for people who wish to persuade others to change their religion, or indeed to abandon religious belief altogether.

The attempt to redefine 'Islamophobia' as a type of racism may be a deliberate attempt to restrict free speech when it comes to criticism of Islam because racist speech is not covered by the Waddington Amendment.

Cultural racism

In fact, the authors of the report wish to extend the concept of racism to include 'cultural racism'. The report explains:

The concept of racialisation thus situates Islamophobia within anti-racism discourse which is not however just informed by biological race, but by a culture – broadly defined – that is perceived to be inferior to and by the dominant one. (p39)

So, racism becomes not merely biological, but cultural. The implication is that if 'Islamic culture' is in any way perceived to be inferior to British culture, then that is by definition Islamophobic. By this definition, discussing how Islamic culture might give fewer rights to women, and how that might be inferior to a culture which provides women with more rights, would be Islamophobic. Opposing the mandatory wearing of the hijab or polygamous marriage on the grounds that they are bad for women could be classed as Islamophobic. Once we sign up to the concept of 'cultural racism', and Islamophobia defined in this way, we risk losing the freedom to criticise Islamic culture altogether. In theory, a member of a political party or organisation that has signed up to this definition could be disciplined for

Islamophobia if they said that UK law is preferable to sharia law.

Threat to History

A list of examples of Islamophobia in the report includes: “claims of Muslims spreading Islam by the sword or subjugating minority groups under their rule” (p.57). Again, this would by implication make it Islamophobic to talk about some of the actions of ISIS or Hamas or other fundamentalist groups or indeed the history of Muslim conquests and Islamic imperialism.

Historian Tom Holland has written a great deal about Islamic history. He wrote in a [tweet](#):

The definition of Islamophobia the Government is being asked to approve is one that threatens to criminalise “claims of Muslims spreading Islam by the sword or subjugating minority groups under their rule”. But most Muslims, for most of history, would have been fine with these claims.

In a further [tweet](#) he explained:

The definition of Islam we are being given is of a liberalised, westernised Islam – but Islamic civilisation is not to be defined solely by liberal, Western standards. Military conquest and the subjugation of minority groups have absolutely been features of Islamic imperialism.

[And:](#)

We risk the ludicrous situation of being able to write without fear of prosecution about the Christian tradition of crusading or antisemitism, but not the Islamic tradition of jihad or the jizya.

So, this definition of Islamophobia would silence historians or deem them Islamophobic if they write about the history of Islamic conquests. This is unacceptable in a free society.

The Network of Sikh Organisations has pointed out that discussion of foundational historical events for Sikhism would be deemed Islamophobic under this definition. The Ninth Guru of Sikhism, [Tegh Bahadur](#), was executed by Mughal authorities when he stood up for the freedom of

religion of Hindu priests who were being converted to Islam by force. Merely relating this story could be deemed Islamophobic. The organisation [points out](#) that many gurdwaras have pictures of *shaheeds* or martyrs hanging on their walls which could also be deemed Islamophobic. This would mean one religion penalising another religion for talking accurately about its history.

It is not only historical events, but current affairs that can be caught in this way. Another example provided in the report is “Accusing Muslims as a group, or Muslim majority states, of inventing or exaggerating Islamophobia, ethnic cleansing or genocide perpetrated against Muslims.” (p56). This makes it Islamophobic to accuse Hamas, for example, of exaggerating claims of genocide by Israel in Gaza. Islamic claims of ‘genocide’ are unassailable on pain of being deemed Islamophobic.

The language of ‘phobia’ is unhelpful

Strictly speaking, a ‘phobia’ is an irrational fear. In this sense ‘Islamophobia’ would mean an irrational fear of Islam. However, the ‘phobia’ suffix is now used as a catch-all to stigmatise legitimate criticisms of beliefs and behaviours. These include homophobia, transphobia and Islamophobia. Thus, all opposition to same-sex marriage can be characterised as an irrational fear of homosexuality – or homophobic – rather than a sincere religious conviction that marriage should be between a man and a woman. Likewise, expressing the view that some people may experience medical regret after gender reassignment surgery can be characterised as rooted in an irrational fear of transgender people – or transphobic. The effect of such ‘phobia’ terms is to silence legitimate debate.

Where does this end? Some people are promoting the term ‘Christophobia’ in order to join in the competition for victim status. But if every ideology gets its own ‘phobia’, will it not be possible to legitimately criticise any? We could have Toryphobia, Capitalistophobia, Socialistophobia, Atheistophobia, Sikhophobia, Hinduphobia, Communistophobia, Environmentalistophobia, Libertarianophobia... [President Putin](#) has taken to accusing ‘Western elites’ of encouraging ‘Russophobia’ which exemplifies the use of ‘phobia’ language to discredit people you disagree with without actually engaging with the arguments. In the discussion by Moray Council about adopting the APPG definition of Islamophobia, some members complained that they had experienced ‘Anglophobia’ whilst living in

Scotland. Adoption of a definition of 'Anglophobia' was discussed.⁴ Do we really want people competing for victim status in this way and all seeking to shut down criticism of their beliefs as 'phobic'?

Muslims and members of other religions or political groups should not be afraid to be confronted with objections and criticisms. Likewise, if society does not want to encourage competition for victimhood and silencing of legitimate debate, then it should not condone the labelling of criticisms as 'phobias'. By adopting a formal definition of 'Islamophobia', organisations and political parties are encouraging this stigmatisation and silencing of debate. If we accept 'Islamophobia', why not all the other phobias listed above?

Muslims themselves have spoken out against this. Khalid Mahmood MP was the first Muslim MP to be elected to Parliament. In a [debate](#) in the House of Commons, he said:

I have been on the receiving end of hate mail and actions from both the far right and from the Islamist community. ... I will take no lessons from anybody who tells me that I am Islamophobic or that I am too much of a Muslim.

We are proud Muslims, and we should start to move away from a victim mentality and be positive about who we are.

In the same debate, [John Hayes MP](#) quoted Muslim scholar, Professor Mohammed Abdel-Haq:

Most Muslims in this country see the preoccupation with Islamophobia, which is increasingly peddled by guilt-ridden white liberals and self-appointed Muslim campaigners, as far from being in their interests, an initiative that is likely to separate, segregate and stigmatise them and their families.

Is the APPG report itself Islamophobic?

Amongst the list of examples of Islamophobia in the APPG report is this one:

Accusing Muslim citizens of being more loyal to the 'Ummah'

⁴ <https://www.civitas.org.uk/content/files/Islamophobia-Revisited.pdf>

(transnational Muslim community) or to their countries of origin, or to the alleged priorities of Muslims worldwide, than to the interests of their own nations. (p.56)

This is interesting in the light of the fatwa above, which argues that Muslims should support the definition of Islamophobia precisely because it serves the Ummah. Even to report this fatwa could be Islamophobic according to this definition.

This would also mean that the [Casey Review](#) would be Islamophobic for reporting that:

We found a growing sense of grievance among sections of the Muslim population, and a stronger sense of identification with the plight of the 'Ummah', or global Muslim community.

Reporting of information like this could be censored as Islamophobic under this definition. No research or report by any organisation which has adopted this definition could safely speculate about loyalty to the Ummah.

Another example of Islamophobia in the report is characterising "Muslims as being 'sex groomers'" (p.57). Of course, the overwhelming majority of Muslims have nothing to do with grooming gangs but the perpetrators of these gangs have been described as "by and large... Muslim men of Pakistani heritage". In fact, this may be why the government resisted publishing its [review](#) into the characteristics of grooming gangs– for fear of being branded 'Islamophobic'.

Other government reports that could be challenged on the grounds of alleged 'Islamophobia' would include Peter Clarke's [investigation](#) into the 'Trojan Horse' affair in Birmingham schools and Erick Pickles' [report](#) into electoral fraud in Tower Hamlets. Ofsted's attempts to promote shared values could also be challenged. This is aside from counter-terrorism reports and operations discussed below.

Threat to press freedom

Several journalists have been accused of being Islamophobic for reporting on Islam-related stories. These include the Times journalists [Dominic Kennedy](#) and [Andrew Norfolk](#), both of whom wrote about the grooming gang scandal. Already journalists are very careful in what they say about

Islamist terrorism. If the APPG definition were accepted then reporting of issues such as these would be seriously hindered. Journalists might not even be able to mention the religion of Muslim perpetrators or discuss possible religious motivations for their crimes. There could be no public debate about whether Mosques should be allowed to broadcast the call to prayer, for example, as any dissent would be deemed 'Islamophobic'.

The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) already seeks to censor press articles that it alleges are Islamophobic. Miqdaad Versi, assistant secretary general of the MCB, regularly complains about alleged 'Islamophobia' in the UK media. He has issued multiple complaints to the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) and frequently obtains corrections or apologies. In one case he succeeded in getting the *Sun* and the *Mail* to issue a [correction](#) stating: "We are happy to make clear that Islam as a religion does not support so-called honour killings." Many Muslims would beg to [differ](#) and could cite scripture in defence of this practice. The journalist Will Heaven [cites](#) a national newspaper editor as confirming that he frequently corrects stories when Versi complains about them simply to put a stop to the deluge of emails which will follow if no correction is published. Heaven [argues](#) that there is a degree of self-censorship going on because of the 'chilling effect' of these complaints.

It is no surprise that the [MCB](#), with Versi taking the lead, has been one of the most vocal organisations campaigning for formal adoption of the APPG definition of Islamophobia (and recently called for an investigation into the Conservative Party's "structural Islamophobia").⁵ If this definition was formally accepted in law, or by press associations or IPSO, this would lead to further censorship of media reporting on Islam-related issues. Press freedom to report honestly and openly about Islamic stories would be lost.

Fear of 'Islamophobia' hindering justice

The [Casey Review](#) highlighted another problem:

Too many public institutions, national and local, state and non-state, have gone so far to accommodate diversity and freedom of expression that they have ignored or even condoned regressive,

⁵ <https://mcb.org.uk/extremism-in-the-conservative-party-muslim-council-of-britain-writes-to-conservative-chair-asking-for-action-against-islamophobia/>

divisive and harmful cultural and religious practices, for fear of being branded racist or Islamophobic...

At its most serious, it might mean public sector leaders ignoring harm or denying abuse.

Already then, even before there was a formal definition of 'Islamophobia', public institutions appear to have been afraid of this label and were turning a blind eye to injustice as a result. People have been afraid to say, or act on, what they really think, even at the risk of perpetuating injustice and harm. This situation would become worse should public institutions adopt a formal definition.

Undermining counter-terrorism operations

[Richard Walton](#), former Head of Counter-Terrorism Command of the Metropolitan Police, has warned that adopting the APPG's definition of 'Islamophobia' would "over time cripple the UK's successful counter-terrorism strategy and counter-terrorism operations". He said:

The APPG definition would thwart the prosecution of individuals for possession of extremist material and dissemination of terrorist publications; even prosecution for membership of (and encouragement of support for) proscribed terrorist groups. Imagine how Anjem Choudary might have used the label 'Islamophobic' in his defence.

[Lord Carlile](#), former Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, also warned of the legal problems that would arise from the government adopting this definition.

Successful and accepted counter-terrorism measures would run the risk of being declared unlawful. The Prevent strand of counter-terrorism policy, which would be thrown into turmoil by the APPG, provokes a refrain of clichéd criticism, but that is rarely evidence based: Prevent demonstrates statistically and evidentially a high net profit of success, which would be lost. The APPG definition would lead to Judicial Review litigation that would hold back the evolution of better counter-terrorism law and practice hand in hand with strengthened religious tolerance.

A [Policy Exchange report](#), co-authored by Richard Walton and Tom Wilson, warns:

In essence, therefore, the proposed definition risks diminishing freedom of speech and impairing our ability, as a society, to debate the causes of Islamist extremism. Inadvertently, it could work against open and far reaching debate on Islamist and other threats, and effectively introduce a blasphemy law which could result in police interventions and arrests by officers for alleged Islamophobic ('racist') words and behaviour.

The report cautions that legal adoption of the definition would result in the police, the Crown Prosecution Service, the judiciary, and Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, all being branded 'institutionally Islamophobic'. Indeed, the concept of 'institutional Islamophobia' is discussed at length in the APPG report. The vagueness of the definition would make this allegation impossible to defend against. If we are serious about tackling terrorism, we need to be able to have frank and open conversations about the causes and ideologies involved. Defining 'Islamophobia' in the way suggested by the APPG is a serious impediment to such conversations.

Silencing criticism of Islam

The APPG report makes explicit that some criticisms of Mohammed or of Islam should be out of bounds.

As such, the recourse to the notion of free speech and a supposed right to criticise Islam results in nothing more than another subtle form of anti-Muslim racism, whereby the criticism humiliates, marginalises, and stigmatises Muslims. One, real life example of this concerns the issue of 'grooming gangs'. (p35)

Notice how the report refers to "a supposed right to criticise Islam", as if that right doesn't really exist. The report continues:

Participants reported being told that 'Mohammed is a paedophile', for instance. This comment does not, in a strictly grammatical sense, have the victim themselves as subject, but is rather an example of the 'criticism of Islam' as it is actually articulated and experienced. Yet, clearly, it is aimed at (and can achieve) harm to individual Muslims, and is not rooted in any meaningful theological debate but

rather in a racist attempt to 'other' Muslims in general, associating them with the crime our society sees as most abhorrent of all. (p35)

What is being referred to here, as the report acknowledges, is actually criticism of Mohammed, not of Muslims. Indeed, some might argue that this is a valid theological debate because this is a criticism of Mohammed that is based on Islamic traditions. Various Islamic [Hadith and histories](#) narrate that Mohammed married Aisha when she was six years old and consummated the marriage when she was nine. Would these Hadith and histories themselves be branded Islamophobic, insofar as they lend support to those making the supposedly Islamophobic allegation against the religion's founder?

It appears therefore that the authors of the report, while paying lip service to free speech, do want to silence criticism of Islam, considering such criticism 'Islamophobic' even when it is rooted in Islamic teaching. Legalisation of this definition comes dangerously close to bringing into effect an Islamic blasphemy law.

Allegations of Islamophobia abound

There is no attempt in the APPG report to determine in what circumstances, if any, accusations of Islamophobia would be invalid. If this definition had the force of law, then it is difficult to see how an accusation of Islamophobia could be disproven.

The [APPG report](#) claims, without any evidence, that "Muslim students who fail to secure entry offers from Russell Group universities" are victims of Islamophobia. This kind of claim evidences a tendency to blame any experienced difficulties on Islamophobia.

The list of those who have been accused of being Islamophobic is long and illustrious. It includes former Prime Ministers [Theresa May](#), [Tony Blair](#) and [Boris Johnson](#). Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, [Amanda Spielman](#), was accused of being Islamophobic for supporting a head teacher of a London primary school which banned the hijab for girls under eight years old. [Sarah Champion](#), MP for Rotherham, was accused of being Islamophobic for warning that politicians should not be afraid to discuss the high number of sexual exploitation and grooming cases against men of Pakistani heritage in the UK. For this, she lost her position in the

Shadow Cabinet at the time. [Maajid Nawaz](#), co-founder of Quilliam, who identifies as a Muslim, is often accused of Islamophobia for speaking out against Islamic extremism. Even Muslims who endorse the APPG definition of Islamophobia are not exempt from accusations of being Islamophobic themselves: Mayor of London [Sadiq Khan](#), who identifies as a Muslim and has endorsed the definition, has also been accused of being Islamophobic.

Opposition to the Definition

The view that the APPG definition of Islamophobia threatens freedom of speech has united diverse groups. In May 2019, an [open letter](#) was sent to the then Home Secretary Sajid Javid warning the government against adopting the definition. The letter was signed by over 40 experts from a range of religious backgrounds, representing Sikhs, Christians, atheists and others. Signatories included Professor Richard Dawkins, Bishop Michael Nazir Ali, Peter Tatchell, Lord Singh of Wimbledon, Stephen Evans of the National Secular Society, Emma Webb of Civitas, Baroness Cox of Queensbury, Mohammed Amin MBE, Ade Omooba MBE, and myself on behalf of Christian Concern. The list includes names and organisations that are rarely found together. [Stephen Evans](#), CEO of the National Secular Society, wrote:

It's not often that we at the National Secular Society agree with Christian Concern! So when we do, it's always worth sitting up and taking notice.

The open letter argued that the definition “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 continued:

We are concerned that allegations of Islamophobia will be, indeed already are 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... we are concerned that the definition will be used to shut down legitimate criticism and investigation... No religion should be given special protection against criticism.

Many other journalists and media commentators also criticised the definition. This effort was successful in that the government did not formally adopt the APPG definition, but instead [announced](#) it would appoint two expert advisors to lead a new study to propose another definition. Much later, in 2022 under a new Prime Minister, and in recognition of the various concerns

expressed, the government [dropped plans](#) to come up with an official definition of Islamophobia.

The Government's Islamophobia Advisor

In July 2019, the government [announced](#) the appointment of Imam Qari Asim as an advisor to lead the work on proposing a definition of Islamophobia. This appointment was made on the last full day in office of Theresa May's administration. Qari Asim has been a vocal critic of Boris Johnson, and it is likely that Theresa May and others in her administration were aware of this when they rushed his appointment through before leaving office. His appointment looked like a deliberate parting shot at the incoming prime minister, landing him with an appointee who would be difficult to replace.

A 2018 [article](#) by Boris Johnson that described women wearing the burka as looking like "letter boxes" or "bank robbers" actually argued *against* banning the burka. Nonetheless, Qari Asim [argued](#) that Johnson's comments "fanned the flames of Islamophobia" and "legitimised the hatred that exists towards Muslim women". For Asim, then, such comments, even made in jest, are unacceptable. Asim also [tweeted](#) a *Guardian* article in 2018 saying: "Boris Johnson's white privilege: imagine he was a black woman."

In 2019, it was [reported](#) that Asim had expressed support for Pakistani radical cleric Khadim Rizvi. Rizvi supported the death penalty for Asia Bibi who was falsely accused of insulting Mohammad. Asim posted a statement on his Facebook page in 2017 in solidarity with the cleric whose organisation was behind protests in Islamabad which were marred by violence. In response to the news report, Asim took the post down and claimed that he had not intended to endorse Rizvi. Asim had previously signed a [letter](#) calling on the government to offer asylum to Asia Bibi.

Asim has [argued](#) that all depictions of Muhammad are haram – forbidden – in Islam. This would include medieval images which have been described as masterpieces. This is a strict interpretation of Islamic law which not all Muslims would agree with. In 2018 Qari Asim gave a talk at a workshop organised by The Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies on 'Law of the Land and Islam'. I was present at the event, and the PowerPoint slides and an

audio recording of his talk are available [online](#).

In his talk, Asim argued that Muslims should obey the law of the land *most of the time*. But he also made clear how he would like the law to accommodate Islamic ideas. For example, he would like to see polygamy legalised and inheritance to favour male heirs in line with sharia principles. He also supports [Islamic finance](#), including a ban on charging interest.

Asim then went on to discuss areas of current law that “really challenge Muslims”. Here, he highlighted same-sex marriage, the absence of blasphemy laws and the honour of the prophet. In relation to blasphemy and the honour of the prophet, Asim claimed that “Muslims cherish freedom of speech”, but then went on to [argue](#):

As we can have exceptions to the freedom of speech on the basis of some words or actions being offensive or distasteful, then if this is something that is distasteful to Muslims, or they find it offensive... then whether we can have that exception or not.

I understood this to mean that he would like criticism of Mohammad to be prohibited as it is not worthy of free speech protections. In the Q&A I pressed him on whether it would make a difference if the criticism of Muhammad was actually true (e.g. that he led military campaigns or discriminated against women). His reply was evasive.

The appointment of Asim to advise the government on a definition of Islamophobia is concerning for those who value free speech. *The Sunday Times* [reported](#) that Qari Asim had faced calls to step down because of these comments. Sir Trevor Phillips is quoted as saying:

Mr Asim seems to want British Muslims to be less British than others. I would urge Qari Asim to distance himself from the views he has aired or reconsider his role on the panel.

Bob Seely MP said: “There are serious questions about Asim’s suitability to lead a government inquiry.”

Qari Asim responded with a [statement](#) claiming that his views on freedom of speech were misrepresented and taken out of context. Readers can access the audio of his talk for themselves. In his statement Asim argues that he greatly values free speech, stating:

The purpose of the definition of anti-Muslim prejudice will be to defend free speech, while challenging hate speech.

This contrasts strongly with the equivocal position he set out in his talk. Asim was not charged with defining “anti-Muslim prejudice”. That is a phrase which clearly differentiates Muslim people from Islamic beliefs. He was instead charged with defining ‘Islamophobia’, yet his response deliberately avoided using that term. Had he been suggesting that “anti-Muslim prejudice” was a clear and sufficient definition then that would have been welcomed – and there would be no need for him to come up with a new one – but he did not say that.

Asim stated that the purpose of the definition was to “defend free speech, while challenging hate speech”. But ‘hate speech’ is notoriously difficult to define.

Asim’s statement did not specifically say that people should be allowed to say things that some Muslims may find “offensive or distasteful”. He did say that “offence is part of living in a free society”, and that “it is inevitable that sometimes people will be offended by the free speech of others”. But he appears to have carefully avoided saying that things which may offend Muslims should be allowed. He also refrained from saying that criticism of Muhammed should be allowed. Therefore, despite his claim to strongly value free speech, his position on it remains equivocal.

In 2022, [Asim](#) backed calls for banning the film *The Lady of Heaven* which is about Mohammad’s daughter. At this the government formally withdrew his appointment with a [letter](#) which said:

Your recent support for a campaign to limit free expression – a campaign which has itself encouraged communal tensions – means it is no longer appropriate for you to continue your work with government in roles designed to promote community harmony.

You have encouraged an ongoing campaign to prevent cinemas screening the film *Lady of Heaven*, a clear effort to restrict artistic expression, and the campaign you have supported has led to street protests which have fomented religious hatred.

The government was right to rescind his appointment, but the fact that he was appointed to this role in the first place given his views remains a matter of concern.

The Case of Sir Trevor Phillips

In March 2020, Sir Trevor Phillips, the former head of the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, was [suspended](#) from the Labour Party over allegations of Islamophobia. This was in spite of the fact that Phillips lobbied for the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006 which was the first law giving practical protection to Muslims.

The suspension of Phillips from the Labour Party demonstrates how formal acceptance of the APPG definition by political parties serves to restrict free speech. Those who raise valid questions about Islamic beliefs and practices are found guilty of Islamophobia – no matter what their prior track record.

Policy Exchange released a [report](#) which contains the full 11-page indictment that the Labour Party sent to Phillips. He was not told who had made the allegations and was instructed to keep the matter entirely confidential. The letter made clear that a decision on the matter would be made behind closed doors in a meeting to which Phillips was not invited.

The allegations consisted of a series of well-known statements that Phillips had made in the media over the previous four years. The following is a typical example:

He told a meeting at the Policy Exchange think tank in Westminster on Monday that Muslims “see the world differently from the rest of us”.

But if Muslims do not see the world differently from others then why are they Muslims? One could equally say that “Christians see the world differently from the rest of us” without being guilty of hatred or prejudice. These are simply true statements. People with a particular worldview inevitably view the world through that perspective which is necessarily different to the view of those who do not accept that worldview. If it is Islamophobic to say Muslims see the world differently, then could it be Islamophobic to say that Muslims believe Mohammad is a prophet of Allah?

Other examples of Phillips' alleged Islamophobia are:

But the most sensitive cause of conflict in recent years has been the collision between majority norms and the behaviours of some Muslim groups. In particular, the exposure of systematic and longstanding abuse by men, mostly of Pakistani Muslim origin in the North of England.

And similarly:

authorities in towns such as Rotherham and Rochdale remain reluctant to associate the child grooming scandals with social norms within the largely Pakistani Muslim neighbourhoods in which they took place.

These are statements of fact. The then Home Secretary, [Sajid Javid](#), said in October 2018:

It is a statement of fact – a fact which both saddens and angers me – that most of the men in recent high-profile gang convictions have had Pakistani heritage.

Free speech is being seriously curtailed if we cannot make factual statements like these.

[Sarah Champion](#), Labour MP for Rotherham, said that the country “has a problem with British Pakistani men raping and exploiting white girls”. Once again, a statement of fact, for which she [lost her position](#) in the shadow cabinet.

Another of Phillips's alleged offences was citing survey findings that portrayed the Muslim community in an unfavourable light. For example:

A third of UK Muslims would like their children educated separately from non-Muslims. A quarter disagreed with the statement that “acts of violence against anyone publishing images of the Prophet could never be justified”; and a quarter were sympathetic to the ‘motives’ of the Charlie Hebdo killers. These facts should presage a society in a turmoil of preparation for change; and a political and media elite engaged in serious debate as to how we meet this challenge to our fundamental values.

This is a quotation from a Civitas [report](#) published in 2015 referencing a 2015 poll by the firm Survation for the BBC. Phillips was accused of Islamophobia merely for citing the findings of a survey. Is it Islamophobic to cite facts when they don't cast the Muslim community in a particularly favourable light? Is it Islamophobic to suggest that such facts give rise to questions that need to be debated and discussed in society? Is it Islamophobic to call for a debate at all – let alone to hold or participate in one?

Phillips [wrote](#): “In essence, I am accused of heresy, and I am threatened with excommunication.” He was right and we can anticipate more excommunications if the APPG definition continues to be accepted and adopted.

To his credit, Khalid Mahmood, Labour MP for Birmingham Perry Bar and the longest-serving Muslim Member of Parliament as well as a member of the APPG on British Muslims, spoke out in defence of Phillips. He [said](#):

I'm afraid this whole episode has provided final proof – were any necessary – that the APPG definition of 'Islamophobia' is simply not fit for purpose... If anything good is to come out of this sad – and frankly embarrassing – episode for my party, it is that it can hopefully serve as a wake-up call to those who believe that the APPG definition of Islamophobia represents any kind of basis for progress. It does not. We need now to accept that reality and move on.

In July 2021, Phillips was quietly [readmitted](#) to the Labour Party. This is welcome news, but it remains concerning that he was suspended in the first place.

Sir Trevor Phillips' case is instructive because it shows where adoption of the APPG definition can lead. Freedom of speech has already been eroded within the political parties that have adopted the definition because members of those parties risk expulsion for even stating facts on issues relating to Islam. During the coronavirus crisis there was discussion about whether it was appropriate to broadcast the Islamic call to prayer during lockdown but a Labour politician raising any questions about this risks being accused of Islamophobia. Debate about the role of religious ideology in motivating terrorism and grooming offences is already stifled. For free speech to prevail, the APPG's definition must be scrapped.

Indeed, any attempt to define 'Islamophobia' will struggle to avoid conflating criticism of the ideology with discrimination against the people. On the face of it, the word means fear of Islam – not of Muslims. If we want to retain free speech and allow criticism of different ideologies and religions then we should avoid any attempt to define 'Islamophobia'.

The Case of Professor Steven Greer

Professor Steven Greer is a human rights scholar with an outstanding international reputation. He was formerly a Professor of Human Rights at Bristol Law School and is a fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences and of the Royal Society of Arts. For seventeen years he taught a module entitled Human Rights in Law, Politics and Society (HLRPS). The unit was annually audited and externally examined, earning unanimous praise by external examiners.⁶ So consistently popular was the course that when the entire undergraduate law curriculum was reviewed in 2019-2020, HLRPS was one of the few units whose continued inclusion in the curriculum generated no discussion or query.

All this changed in October 2020 when the Bristol University Islamic Society (BRISOC) formally complained to the university that the 'Islam, China and the Far East' module of the HLRPS unit was 'Islamophobic'. Professor Greer was not informed of the existence of the complaint until 11th December and it was not until 15th February 2021 that he was officially informed of the full allegations against him. In January 2021 BRISOC had launched an online social media campaign with a petition calling for Professor Greer to apologise to all Muslim students and for the offending material to be removed from the module. The [petition](#), which remains online as of today, has garnered over 4,000 signatures and also demands a formal apology from the university.

BRISOC's [complaint](#) outlined the allegations against Professor Greer. He has responded to all of them in his book.⁷ Some of the statements made in the course of the HLRPS unit and deemed 'Islamophobic' by BRISOC include:

- "Women who wear the hijab are less likely to work outside home [sic] or be involved in higher education."
- "The Qur'an also permits the physical chastisement by a husband

⁶ Steven Greer. 'Falsely Accused of Islamophobia: My Struggle Against Academic Cancellation.' Academic Press. 2023.

⁷ *ibid.* p. 115-119.

of his wife.”

- “Islam spread rapidly through war, conquest, trade and conversion.”
- “Islam was a progressive faith insofar as its open to all.” [sic]
- “Several other well documented areas of friction in traditional political Islam with regards to human rights: position of women – divorce, custody of children, inequality in legal testimony (woman’s testimony in Sharia court is worth half that of a man), position of non-Muslims and other minorities in Islamic states – only Muslims are full citizens.”

Some of these statements are matters of historical record, others are textually and theologically accurate according to the Qur’an. Quite why the statement that Islam is “a progressive faith” should be deemed Islamophobic remains a mystery.

BRISOC further complained that Professor Greer had defended the government’s Prevent programme. This is true. Professor Greer has argued that the Prevent counterterrorist programme is not discriminatory, racist, Islamophobic or anti-democratic and that it does not systematically violate human rights.⁸ BRISOC’s position appears to be that to deny that Prevent is Islamophobic is, itself, Islamophobic. An equivalently absurd claim would be that anyone who opposes Prevent is a terrorist sympathiser. The accusation of Islamophobia has the effect of shutting down debate and dissent, and demonising those who support Prevent.

BRISOC’s social media campaign breached confidentiality about the complaint and also spread false and malicious accusations against Professor Greer in an attempt to silence and discredit him. In the ensuing social media storm Professor Greer was compared to Samuel Paty, the French school teacher beheaded by an Islamist militant in October 2020 for discussing Charlie Hebdo cartoons in a class discussion about free speech and blasphemy. A suspicious incident outside Professor Greer’s home in February prompted him and his wife to flee the family home, taking refuge elsewhere for some days on the advice of the police.

It was not until July 2021 that the University Assessor’s inquiry concluded by comprehensively, unequivocally and unreservedly exonerating Professor Greer. While the Assessor’s report remains confidential, Professor Greer

⁸ Ibid. p. 131.

relates that he was not criticised in any way. On the contrary, his expertise and cooperation with the inquiry were praised.⁹

However, far from promptly announcing Professor Greer's innocence and launching disciplinary action against BRISOC for making malicious and unfounded complaints against him, the University instead wrote to Professor Greer on 6th September notifying him that the Islam, China Far East unit would be changed. By way of explanation, the letter cited "the likelihood of recurrence of complaints" and stated that "it is important that Muslim students in particular do not feel that their religion is being singled out or in any way 'othered' by class material".¹⁰ This capitulation to BRISOC failed to acknowledge that Christianity, liberalism, communism, and Confucianism were all exposed to critique in the HLRPS course. Why was Islam singled out for special protection? Why wasn't BRISOC subject to scrutiny when it emerged that its complaints against Professor Greer were vexatious?

The stress generated by this damaging campaign and the failure of Bristol to support Professor Greer led him to be signed off work by a doctor for some months.

On 8th October 2021, [Bristol University](#) finally released a "statement regarding complaint [sic] against Professor Steven Greer". The statement confirmed that "after a rigorous examination of the facts and considering the views of both parties, we can confirm that the complaint has not been upheld and those involved have been informed of the outcome". However, it went on to say: "Although the complaint has not been upheld, we recognise BRISOC's concerns and the importance of airing differing views constructively." But this is disingenuous: BRISOC's social media campaign was far from 'constructive' and given that none of the complaints were upheld what exactly did the University 'recognise' about BRISOC's allegations?

The statement also expressly denied "claims that the human rights module taught by Professor Greer has been cancelled". This is not the full picture: while the HRLPS unit remains on the curriculum the 6 September letter to Professor Greer clearly stated that the material relating to Islam would be removed, just as BRISOC had demanded.

9 Ibid. p. 72.

10 Ibid. p. 72.

What often goes unremarked about this sorry episode is that Bristol University has formally adopted the APPG definition of Islamophobia. The adoption of this definition is mentioned in BRISOC's petition and in a [statement](#) provided to the press by the university. BRISOC's [petition](#) complains that:

The recent adoption of the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) definition of Islamophobia has had no effect in practice and we feel it is now our representative responsibility to highlight how the APPG definition of Islamophobia seeks to protect no one and is wholly not fit for purpose in addressing our experiences of Islamophobia, coupled with the fact that according to the university implementation of policies to protect its students have to be "balanced" with "academic freedom".

BRISOC is here complaining that the APPG definition has failed to address their "experiences of Islamophobia". BRISOC feels that the adoption of the APPG definition has been a failure simply because Professor Greer has not been found guilty of it. It is just as well that Bristol University's Assessor did not have the APPG definition in mind when determining whether Professor Greer had been Islamophobic. Just what definition of Islamophobia she did have in mind is not known since her report remains confidential.

The fact is, however, that by distancing itself from his course material and failing to stand up to the malicious bullying and intimidation of Professor Greer, the university has effectively upheld BRISOC's vexatious allegations against him.

On 12th September 2021, the [Free Speech Union](#) wrote to the Vice Chancellor of Bristol University to express concern about the University's mishandling of BRISOC's complaints. The letter is available online and raised eight pertinent questions about the actions of the University. The University refused to answer the questions, [claiming](#) that there was a requirement for confidentiality. It said that the material relating to Islam in the HRLPS module was still being taught. While claiming that "freedom of expression and academic freedom are at the heart of our University mission" it nevertheless emphasised that "the protections given to academic freedom are a privilege, and with that privilege comes responsibility". This strongly implied that the University believed that Professor Greer had been irresponsible in his exercise of academic freedom.

Professor Greer may have been formally exonerated, but he has been informally discredited. BRISOC's strategy paid off. The University failed to openly support Professor Greer in his exercise of academic freedom and freedom of expression. Instead, it tacitly agreed to BRISOC's demands and BRISOC has received no reprimand or disciplinary action for its conduct. Rather, the [University](#) has been at pains to "recognise BRISOC's concerns".

Professor Greer labelled BRISOC's allegations as "a particularly savage example of 'Islamofauxbia'".¹¹ He defines this as "a false allegation of anti-Muslim prejudice – typically intended to silence the kind of searching reflections upon Islam to which every single... ideology should be exposed". By contrast, the response of the University demonstrates 'Islamophobia-phobia': they were so terrified of being accused of being Islamophobic that they carefully avoided openly supporting Professor Greer when he was subjected to vexatious accusations.

The implications here are momentous. As [Toby Young](#) said: "Bristol's treatment of Prof Greer is outrageous. By kowtowing to the Islamic Society, the university has issued a gold-embossed invitation to activists to submit vexatious complaints about its employees." Who will dare to teach about Islam with the slightest critical engagement at Bristol University now? Criticism of Islamic theology or history is now effectively off-limits for universities because of rampant 'Islamophobia-phobia'. No matter how groundless the accusation, guilt is assumed the moment an Islamic Society levels an accusation. In relation to Islam, academic freedom and freedom of expression are effectively lost.

11 Steven Greer. 'Falsely Accused of Islamophobia: My Struggle Against Academic Cancellation.' Academic Press. 2023, pp.168-169.

Conclusion

Any attempt to define 'Islamophobia' and have that definition adopted by political parties and other organisations is a threat to free speech. Legitimate debate is being shut down by allegations of Islamophobia. Legitimising accusations of Islamophobia not only harms free speech for non-Muslims but also for Muslims who want to raise questions about their faith, or who simply do not want to restrict debate. Already at least one person has been suspended from a political party for alleged Islamophobia, while an academic has been professionally ruined and seen all his material about Islam cleansed from his university course lest it offend Muslim students. Where will restrictions on free speech end?

The APPG definition, in particular, is not fit for purpose and it is time for politicians and others to recognise that. Political parties that have adopted this definition should abandon it if they care about free speech. The same applies to local councils, universities, and other organisations.

It is encouraging that the government has abandoned its plans to define Islamophobia. However, if Labour comes to power in the next election, this plan is likely to be resurrected.

Anyone who cares about free speech should care about how allegations of Islamophobia are used to restrict the expression of legitimate opinions. In a free society, we must be at liberty to debate and criticise all kinds of beliefs and practices. Legitimising the concept of 'Islamophobia' works against this. We urge the government, politicians, and all who care for our basic freedoms, to recognise this and resist calls to adopt a formal definition of the term.

