

Lead Commissioner speech at British Future

Thank you for inviting me today. I have read this insightful report, and I want to pay tribute to British Future and all the vital work they do in advancing the debates around identity, integration, migration and extremism. As an organisation, the work you do, as this report shows is timely and much needed.

I also want to thank Sunder for sitting on my Commission's Expert Group and for providing me with the challenge and advice I seek from the group.

I don't think there's anyone here today who doesn't recognise the serious challenges, including challenging hatred and prejudice, that face us today as a society and as a country.

As some of you will know my Commission is currently finalising a report we have been working on, which will put forward a picture of extremism in our country, the challenges it presents and the need for a new and bold approach in tackling it.

In this role I've visited 15 towns and cities across England and Wales. I've launched the first ever public consultation on extremism, receiving nearly 3,000 responses. I've commissioned almost 30 academics to write papers on extremism. We are analysing government data and reviewing the current response to extremism.

Evidence, engagement and impartiality are the key principles that drive our work and I look forward to presenting our findings in our report in the coming months.

The report will make the case that the work of challenging extremism has never been more important. As a long-standing counter extremism activist and now as Commissioner, I've seen first-hand why we need to challenge extremism.

And quite simply it is that extremism, in all its manifestations is threatening the wellbeing of our democracy. It is eroding and undermining our democratic way of life; our principles and values as a country.

We have to continue to rise this challenge. If we don't we let down victims of extremism, we fail our diverse communities, our inclusive society and the values we have fought for over the decades in our country.

It is wonderful to see some familiar faces here today, including some of my former funders. I am grateful for your support during my Inspire days, because quite simply Inspire, the NGO that I helped to co-found, would not have existed for as long as it did, had it not been for their support.

Countering extremism is gruelling work. I know what it feels like to be a victim of extremism. I know what it feels like to be targeted by extremists

and I know that you often face abuse and a lack of support. I know what it feels like to challenge extremism.

But I also remember how during my time at Inspire, civil society folk would often say to me that CE was negative work, that it was counter-productive. How could the E word bring people together, surely it did the opposite?

But that is not how I understood the value of counter extremism.

On the contrary, I recognised how countering extremism is about upholding our democratic norms: pluralism, equal citizenship, human rights, individual liberty and promoting an inclusive society.

The vision for countering extremism – as we will be outlining in our report, is fundamentally a positive one. And it entails a commitment to those values; not in a tokenistic way or as I have seen too often – where these values are sacrificed in the face of difficult conversations or even in the name of community cohesion. Sometimes by even our elected officials.

It is about taking a principled and sometimes painful position, which may not make you popular but is certainly the right thing to do; in defending our democratic norms. But this requires principled leadership at every level. From government and politicians, to local authorities and civil society groups, from faith leaders to NGOs.

In response to British Future's report, I want to touch on how we do counter extremism work, the need for diverse messages for different audiences and the challenge of the current political and social climate that faces us all as we seek to deliver this work.

How we do counter extremism is vital.

It's important that we use the term extremism with precision, rather than a lazy catch all for "stuff we don't like." As the British Future report points out, prejudice takes many forms. This is also the case with extremism too. We need precision and consensus about the beliefs, behaviours and harms that result in extremism.

Extremism has never been just about violence or terrorism.

When we talk about the Far Right or Islamist extremism, it's often in the context of terrorism. But this ignores the wider spectrum of extremism whether it's FR, Islamist, animal rights, Far Left, Sikh or other.

I've been concerned about the display of extremist behaviour and language within our wider society and how that manifests.

The hatred, intimidation and persecution of others, the restriction of other people's rights and opportunities by those who are driven by a set of beliefs or ideological cause.

Extremism causes harm at an individual, communities and societal level.

The current CE approach lacks this full breadth, which is why putting forward a substantial understanding of extremism – the behaviours, beliefs and harms – must be an important step for my Commission. We will be elaborating on this in much more depth in our report.

The British Future report highlights the challenges of hatred and prejudice but also why we should be confident that we can succeed. We do need to recognise that there are different audiences which will require different messages. There are a range of views – as one would expect in a democratic, plural society.

What British Future have rightly identified is the need to engage with these diverse voices including the latent hostile and even active enmity groups that can be found within the Migration Rejectionists.

The types of campaigns British Future identify are much needed.

Yesterday was the third anniversary of the murder of Jo Cox – an act which deeply shocked us all. Three years on, the picture of our country is a deeply worrying one.

A poll by Britain Thinks shows that Britain is more polarised, more pessimistic and angrier than it has been for decades. There is an urgent need to build a common ground and precisely because of this polarisation, it is vitally important that all views are engaged with; not just the ones we agree with or find palatable. Otherwise what's the point doing in what we do, if all we are going to do is preach to the converted?

However, I do believe this is becoming increasingly difficult. When one seeks to engage in dialogue “with the other side” or with those whose views you do not find palatable, you are met with shrill accusations of legitimising or normalising prejudice. I've always been intrigued by the evidence for such claims, is there any evidence for them?

And sadly, these arguments are sometimes advanced, well-meaningly I might add, by those who would consider themselves liberals or progressives. But this is having profoundly negative consequences.

As a result, we see a growing and worrying culture of the shutting down of debate altogether; where if anyone who holds and expresses a different view, they find themselves, within a heartbeat, labelled as enemies, traitors, fascists and Nazis.

This is not just occurring within the mainstream of our society. It is also the case in faith minority communities as the Commission has seen repeatedly, where screams of Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and anti-Pantheic are used by Muslim, Jewish and Sikh activists respectively against believers from within the same faith community – because they don't share, agree with another's view, and with the hope of closing down much needed scrutiny and debate. This is dangerous.

At a political level, we also see this hostility at an electoral level too. The LSE have recently launched a UK Electoral Hostility Barometer which

showed that 31% of voters say they have personally experienced electoral hostility. Where 1 in 4 British citizens have experienced insults, and 1 in 8 – threats.

As has been well reported, abuse and threats towards MPs are now at an unprecedented level. But this is also happening across our society to faith leaders, civil society groups and especially to women and ethnic minority groups.

This growing intolerance is exactly why the types of projects and messages British Future have alluded to are so needed. But we also need to recognise how this hostile climate in our society and in the very space we seek to operate in, is further undermining our work. We need to understand how this attack on political, social and religious pluralism is not only threatening our democracy; it is threatening the very ability to deliver the type of projects and campaigns British Future have highlighted in their report.

I know this is the case because having travelled the country, I heard countless examples of this – from teachers, faith leaders, counsellors, youth workers and counter-extremists themselves. Not only is threatening our work in delivering much needed counter extremism projects; this erosion of pluralism is creating a more favourable climate for extremism.

Which is why I believe it is critical that we examine the state of extremism in our society today and why I am bringing forward a contemporary vision for what countering extremism should look like in 2019.

I will be making recommendations about how the government's approach can keep pace.

How can it build a response based on this contemporary picture of extremism? Is its response to the harmful activity of groups and individuals quick enough? Effective enough? Long term enough? How can it better support those on the ground? And what is the right approach to social media?

But challenging extremism has never been just a job for government.

It requires a whole society approach including civil society. As British Future's report wonderfully shows. And it requires bold, brave and principled leadership.

The report shows the firm value of dialogue. That there's a space for all but the most hardened and unwilling to debate, if you can recognise their concerns. Our work has shown the value of creating (not shutting down) spaces to discuss the difficult issues. Especially among and including young people who hold sympathies to extremist beliefs and behaviour. Shouting nazi or fascist at them does not create a space conducive to dialogue.

But I also want more people in communities speaking out.

As the report shows messengers are vital. I have seen how sometimes in the face of extremism, some prefer silence over doing or saying the right thing. I know speaking out against prejudice isn't easy. You must be ready for the

push back. But it's desperately needed. Because if there is anything counter extremism is not, it is not passive. It is about being pro-active. Extremists, being the opportunists that they are, are very good at taking this position. And it is why an effective CE response needs to be five steps ahead of the game if we are to begin creating the counter extremism response that is needed. This is the step-change our counter extremism response needs.

Our response also needs different interventions and different tools.

As the report makes clear, for example, you have to start by understanding who you're speaking to. Our campaigns and messages will be different when reaching out to supporters or potential supporters, or if we are intending on reaching the centre ground to strengthen norms or if we are seeking to reach more hostile audiences. And what the report did show, critically, is that there are messages that can reach across audiences. This is something we must build on and I believe there is a lot of potential in such messages especially at a time when our country is divided.

As we prepare to leave the EU, the job of bringing the country back together is vital. What unifying messages can be used to help us achieve this? I think there is much we can learn from projects like Remember Together; where we can build a consensus.

This leads me to a final point: the need for consistency in our work. I cannot over-emphasise this; especially if we are wanting to promote messages across audiences and are keen to bridge audiences. Yet we lack this consistency in counter extremism work.

I will be very upfront. I meet people on the Left who are more than happy to talk about the extremism of the FR but point-blank refuse to address Far Left extremism. I meet people on the Right who are keen to talk about Far Left or Islamist extremism but downplay the threat of the Far Right. I meet activists from Muslim communities who point to the threat of the Far Right but are silent on Islamist extremism.

This for me as Commissioner is untenable, and it is why we as a country, have not been able to develop a more consensus-based attitude towards counter extremism. And it is why I have mentioned repeatedly today the need for principled and brave leadership.

We have to call out intolerance, prejudice and extremism from wherever and whoever it comes from. Yes, I am talking about politicians and political parties. But I am also talking about civil society and all of us in this room. We must resist the temptation of tribal politics because this lack of consistency in our approach is undermining our ability to build consensus and to convince the different audiences we seek to influence.

The challenges are stark, but I also believe they provide an opportunity for us to make a positive difference and to help shape the future of our country.

I am confident because I've met many Brits like us, who – whether black or white, young or old, working or middle-class – want to push back against the

growing intolerance in our country. They don't believe that this is what our country stands for. And that makes me feel confident about the future. We will always be – and rightly so a diverse country, but we can and must try to bridge those differences through dialogue, a recognition of our common humanity and dignity and in the hope of a more positive and inclusive society.

Thank you