

Speech: Lead Commissioner Sara Khan on the work of the Commission

Thank you Fiyaz for inviting me to speak on this important issue.

I also want to thank you for all that you do in challenging extremism, often at great expense to yourself.

I know how hard you work. Your commitment is nothing short of inspirational.

I also know how difficult it has been for you – the threats, abuse and hatred you receive from all sides.

Thank you for all that you do.

It is exactly one year today since my appointment as Lead Commissioner.

I didn't realise at the time that 24 January is also national compliment day.

I wasn't the only one.

The Home Office had barely made the announcement when the calls came for me to resign.

Racist and misogynistic abuse was unleashed on social media, including sadly from my fellow Muslims. Disinformation and outright lies circulated in the press.

Fiyaz asks if we're winning the battle against extremism.

I'm still here one year later – and I'll go on to talk about the work I have done and am about to do.

I want to begin by saying above all what gives me the strength is the courage I see all around me.

I want to tell you about an event I attended last week.

Golders Green Mosque was planning to host an exhibition about the 71 Albanian Muslims who had protected Jews during the Holocaust.

It's a wonderful, yet little known story of bravery and courage.

Sadly, a small yet loud group of Jews and Muslims did not want the exhibition to go ahead.

The Mosque came under intense pressure and the exhibition was cancelled.

To many of us, it felt as if those who wanted to burn bridges and build walls had won.

However, a small handful of activists were determined to not give in.

So, they put on the exhibition, called Love Thy Neighbour, at Eton Road Mosque in Redbridge last week.

Despite attempts to intimidate the mosque, the event was a massive success.

I want to share with you the words of the Chairman, Mr Bashir Chaudhry, a grandfather, who like my dad came to this country in the early 1960s – he said:

This exhibition opened my eyes to how Jews and Muslims worked together in that difficult time. For the last couple of weeks, I've had emails and calls saying I shouldn't be hosting this event in a Muslim centre. I said to them 'no YOU are wrong'.

I doubt Mr Chaudhry would ever describe himself either as a counter extremist or as fighting the battle against extremism.

But his civility, dignity and refusal to give in, in the face of intimidation is what countering extremism looks like.

And if that wasn't enough to qualify him as a hero, he also managed to arrange the best curry spread I've had for a long time.

I want to share what I've learnt in the last 12 months about extremism and the many people, like Mr Chaudhry, bravely pushing back.

I launched the independent Commission on Countering Extremism last March.

My priority was to engage widely.

I've sat down with nearly 500 people from across the country; both with critics and supporters alike.

From teachers to youth workers, academics to government officials, police to campaigners and tech companies to faith leaders.

I've visited 14 towns and cities across England and Wales – hearing first-hand the impact that extremism is having on individuals, communities and wider society.

Yesterday I was in Cleveland in the North East, speaking to the police, the council and civil society groups who shared what extremism looks like in their area. They are worried about growing Far Right extremism.

I've also carried out polling of people's views on extremism.

We've conducted a review of academic literature on extremism.

We've been examining the latest data on hate crime, Prevent referrals to Channel, social media trends and other indicators.

I want to share with you four messages coming out of my early work.

The first is that there is widespread concern about growing extremism, intimidation and intolerance in our country.

Our polling showed that 73% of Britons are worried about rising levels of extremism.

In every area I've visited, examples of extremism and hostility were shared.

The harms of extremism go wider than terrorism.

Academic research points to the breakdown of community cohesion and reduced trust in our institutions, social exclusion and isolation.

But there is also the harm to individuals – the suppression of people's human rights, the denial of one's humanity and freedom.

Youth workers have warned extremists are seeking to recruit young people not only through social media but in communities.

Charities have told me how repeated far right marches have left refugees too scared to leave their homes. These are people who've fled war torn countries because they were affected by extremism – only to be targeted by extremists of a different kind here.

Practitioners and Muslim groups have described to me how Far Right extremists are exploiting local tensions to evoke anti-Muslim hatred or conspiratorial anti-establishment sentiment.

I have heard how Islamist extremists claimed that the terror attack at Finsbury Park and even the fire at Grenfell Tower was an example of the West conducting its war against Islam and Muslims.

I've met people in faith communities, such as the Sikh community, who have been labelled a traitor because they are standing up to the religious fundamentalists in their own community.

These examples are just some of the warning signs I have seen.

But my second message is that we don't know the full scale of extremism in our country or the harms it is having.

When the Commission carried out its review of current academic literature, we were struck by not what we know about extremism, but in fact, the many things we don't know about extremism.

How much of a problem is extremism in schools and in other regulated settings?

What is the size and influence of extremist groups?

What drives extremism in our country – whether at an individual, societal or institutional level?

How is extremism mainstreamed and normalised in our society? What positive role can media play?

What are the evolving tactics of extremists? We have seen they are increasingly becoming professionalised and are intellectualising extremism.

How they are exploiting social media to spread disinformation and conspiracy theories, mainstreaming and normalising their propaganda in wider society?

We need to understand what the most effective ways are to counter extremism.

What may work in one part of the country, may not necessarily work in another.

What may be effective in countering one form of extremism, may not have the same effect in countering another form of extremism.

What does countering extremism look like online?

We're at Twitter. Social media companies have stepped up their work to take down illegal terrorist material.

But what about the kind of content that concerns us all?

The kind of legal far right extremist content which radicalised Darren Osborne? Or the kind of legal extremist content that people like Anjem Choudary produced which helped radicalise hundreds if not thousands of people?

We are still grappling with how to deal with legal extremist content that is online.

We are seeking to answer some of these questions as part of our study into extremism in England and Wales.

The third message is about the good work being delivered by those countering extremism.

I've met so many inspiring and compassionate individuals who are challenging hatred and championing equality, human rights and our fundamental freedoms.

Organisations – who despite the lack of funding are still pushing back against extremist groups in their area.

Young people who are passionate in advocating for diversity.

Councillors who are prepared to put their principles before political fall-out.

Faith leaders who are not afraid to challenge the extremists within their own community.

There are so many unsung heroes who care about our country, our communities and our democracy and are not prepared to stand by while extremists are

actively propagating hatred and conspiracy theories.

That gives me hope and optimism.

Never under-estimate the power of an individual or a small group to bring about effective change.

In the North East I heard from one man who told me he had managed to stop a Free Tommy rally from being organised because he had convinced his mates – what Tommy Robinson really stood for. The effort and impact of just that one individual cannot be over-estimated.

My fourth message is that if a movement of people standing up to extremism and hatred is to thrive, we must address the fact that public debate itself is toxic, angry and polarised.

Too many people experience abuse, threats and intimidation across our country simply for standing up for what they believe in or for carrying out their daily business.

This toxic climate has become part of daily life for not just MPs like Anna Soubry but also for academics, activists and anyone who simply wants to share their opinion.

This is creating a chilling effect on freedom of expression and it is having an impact on our democracy.

This lack of civility in our country creates a climate favourable to extremists.

We all need to, as the Archbishop of Canterbury recently stated, learn to disagree well.

I believe that has to start with politicians from across the political divide. They need to set the highest of standards.

These are some of the challenges facing us in countering extremism today.

I believe we need a movement against hatred and extremism – a diverse coalition of all those committed to championing our fundamental freedoms.

I want to give more people the confidence to speak out.

I want to give those on the frontline the confidence to navigate these complex issues – and policy makers the confidence to back them.

I want to give academics the confidence to dig into the issue of extremism without fear.

There is more that can be done to support – both financially and emotionally – organisations who are trying to push back.

Too many operate on a shoestring. That too was my experience when I used to run Inspire, a small counter extremism NGO. We never knew if we would exist

by the end of the financial year, because we struggled for funding.

I want to give funders the confidence to back vital counter extremism work.

How do we do this?

My focus is to bring together a wide range of data and evidence – so we can have a civilised debate and make the case for this work.

That includes evidence from our public consultation – the first one ever on extremism.

I can reveal that we've already had more than 1500 submissions from across the country.

Thank you to everyone who has shared their experiences and views.

We want to hear from as many people as possible.

This is a unique opportunity to have your say on extremism and what we should do about it. I would really encourage you to respond to our call for evidence which ends on the 31st January.

But that's not all we are doing.

We are giving academics the chance to bid to write papers on extremism.

We have requested information from Government departments and regulators so that we can analyse data on indicators of extremism.

To understand the harms extremism is having in our country, we are organising workshops, visits and testimonies.

We have also begun work on a nationally representative survey on extremism.

I look forward to sharing our findings with you later this year.

I want to end by stressing that how we work is as important as what we work on.

Our work will be transparent, impartial and evidence-driven.

Extremists want to shut down debate – we have to let it flourish.

That is why we have to listen to differing views.

That is why we cannot shy away from difficult discussions.

We have to ask, in the current political climate, if extremists will exploit Brexit.

We met with experts and those on the ground earlier this month to start this very discussion.

We have to accept that there are many people who worry about the definition of extremism – that it may capture genuine protest or simply minority or unfavourable views that fall out of the mainstream.

That is why in our consultation we are asking if the government's definition is helpful – and if not what it should be.

Finally, my Commission is underpinned by human rights principles and a belief in equality.

As a long-standing counter-extremism campaigner and as someone who studied human rights, I recognise that states sometimes use the banner of "extremism" to silence legitimate dissenting voices.

I am very alive to this which is why the Commission has embedded the principles of human rights and equality in our work.

But what isn't often acknowledged enough is how extremists threatens the human rights of many – women, minority groups and others.

And make no mistake: if there is one thing extremists of all backgrounds and persuasions have in common – it is a fundamental opposition to the very notion of human rights and equality.

In conclusion: there is no doubt there are serious challenges facing us in our struggle against extremism.

These challenges are significant and grave.

In an era of polarisation and division, the rise of populism across the world, the influence of social media in spreading disinformation and fake news – we have our work cut out in pushing back against extremists who thrive in precisely such an environment.

But there is hope.

There are many of us who are committed to diversity, equality and mutual respect pushing back against those who are contributing to extremism.

All of us can and must play our part. It is on all of us to defend the liberties, diversity and freedom that our country represents: the human rights that have been the bedrock of our democracy for centuries. Extremists seek to undermine our values, our society and our country. It is down to all of us to stand up and defend those values and our democracy.

Thank you.