

Speech: Lead Commissioner's speech to the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right Conference

Thank you to Matthew, Will and the team for inviting me to the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right's inaugural conference.

It's an honour to open such an exciting and timely event.

It is by no means easy to work in the field of counter extremism.

You are often met with abuse and hostility. So, thank you for your work and commitment to this really important cause.

I'm here – like you all – to discuss, debate and, above all, learn.

As Lead Commissioner for Countering Extremism, I want to help all of us better understand the threat of extremism and find more effective ways to challenge it.

This is an important moment in the Commission's work.

We are working on a study into all forms of extremism for the Home Secretary.

As we come to the end of our evidence-gathering, we are analysing a huge amount of material and beginning the job of crafting the findings into a major report.

An emerging picture is forming of extremism in England and Wales.

It manifests itself in radicalisation, violence and terror.

But, also in a patchwork of dangerous individuals and groups who spread hatred and intolerance.

We are also witnessing a worrying mainstreaming of intolerance and prejudice.

These different phenomena are all linked by ideas, networks and the harm they cause to individuals, communities and wider society.

I want us to develop a toolkit of tailored and effective responses to counter-extremism.

These responses should be underpinned by collaboration between academics, practitioners and policy-makers – a virtuous circle of robust research, new and improved interventions, evaluation and sharing best practice.

This is part of what I call a whole society response.

Today's conference, the speakers, the panels and the report you are

publishing are an important contribution to this.

My work covers all forms of extremism – Islamist extremism, far right extremism and other forms of religious or single issue-based extremism.

Threat of the far right

Today at this conference we are considering the threat we face from the far right or radical right.

I was travelling to Birmingham in March as news broke of the terrorist attack in Christchurch.

I met with Mosque representatives and Muslim community activists – we shared in the shock that someone could target worshippers in such a horrific way.

The Prime Minister of New Zealand is today meeting with world leaders to discuss challenging extremism online. I welcome her leadership on this issue.

The attack in Christchurch had frightening echoes of the attack last year on a Synagogue in Pittsburgh and the recent atrocities in Sri Lanka.

And such violent extremism is sadly familiar to us.

My Commission was announced a year after the murder of MP Jo Cox and shortly before Makram Ali was murdered in Finsbury Park.

Police and security services have foiled four extreme right-wing plots in the last few years.

We have seen a rise in Prevent referrals for far right concerns.

Violent far right extremism is a grave and serious threat – and one the government rightly takes very seriously.

But as I have travelled the country I have also heard about the rise of radical right activists who exploit tensions to spread anti-minority hatred.

I have been looking closely at a series of protests and demonstrations in Sunderland, for example.

I've spoken to the police, to the council, to local faith leaders, to the editor of the local paper and to community members.

Sunderland also demonstrates the role of 'radical right' eco-system.

Activists saw Sunderland as an opportunity. They came from across the country – and even from abroad – to the city to whip up hatred. They make videos and paid for billboards.

Residents, communities and the city as a whole suffered.

A mosque representative cried as he told me that because of his willingness

to stand up to far right campaigners, his home and work details had been put on Facebook by far right activists alongside false claims that he was a paedophile.

In the report released today, Matthew argues that Anti-Muslim Hatred has entered mainstream discourse and he cites the appalling numbers of Anti-Muslim attacks – both online and offline.

This is borne out in the hate crime figures which show a 40% rise in religiously motivated attacks and in the many conversations I've had with community leaders, experts and activists up and down the country.

On a visit to Teesside University last week, researchers told me how narratives promoted by far right activists are also being shared widely by young people in this area.

Hope Not Hate polling shows 47% of the British public think there are no-go areas in Britain where sharia law dominates, and non-Muslims cannot enter.

I am worried that the mainstream is becoming a more hospitable place for the radical right and anti-Muslim hatred.

Intro to the Commission / our journey

These are worrying times.

It's the right time for this conference to be discussing innovative approaches.

And it's why my Commission is looking into the threat of extremism and what more we can do as a society to counter it.

I bring to this role a commitment to engage widely and take an evidence-based approach.

My first move was a tour of the country to get a snap-shot of the challenge of extremism and understand better the local response.

It helped me start to build the picture of threat.

Experts also warned that social media has been a game-changer, allowing extremists to spread conspiracy theories and disinformation, amplifying their hatred and their activities further and faster than ever before.

They described a far right online eco-system, which is thriving in a polarised environment supported by online structures that reinforces views and result in echo chambers.

And I have been inspired by the brave stories of individuals and groups – many of them just ordinary members of the public – who have stood up to hatred and extremism.

I met many unsung heroes who are the backbone of our country demonstrating

unrelenting courage – often receiving more abuse than support.

I saw the power of community-based, collaborative and innovative interventions – whether it was using music to draw young people away from the far right or an Imam combining his knowledge of the Quran and social media to challenge Islamist narratives.

Call for evidence and academic papers

I wanted to give more people the chance to share their views and experiences – so we ran the first ever public call for evidence receiving almost 3,000 responses.

Thank you to those in this room who contributed.

We are currently pulling together the statistics and will publish them shortly.

I must admit that I was shocked at the number of people who said they had witnessed extremism either in their local area or online.

I was also struck by the variety of extremisms – not just far right or Islamist, but far left, Sikh and Hindu extremism and animal rights extremism.

But what the call for evidence does above all is shine a light on the harms of extremism.

Which go beyond radicalisation or hate crime.

I've read page-after-page of powerful and disturbing testimony of the way in which extremism of all kinds has a deep impact on individuals, on communities and on wider society.

I was really struck by how hate and bigotry occur within a community, because individual identity is not respected.

Whole communities also suffer harm from extremism.

In its submission to our call for evidence, the Local Government Association said extremism disrupted the life of local communities, affecting businesses and deterring residents and visitors from going into their town centres.

I heard the powerful message that when extremism takes hold all of society suffers – it undermines our democracy, our fundamental freedoms and rich diversity.

We want to examine this in greater depth and we're now working with King's College London to analyse our call for evidence data and develop a typology of harm that will lay the foundation for a much deeper understanding of extremism and for further work.

This brings me on to the 30 academics who are working on short papers for us, that we have commissioned. On the far right, on Islamism, on the drivers of

extremism, extremism online and approaches to counter extremism.

Some of them might be here today. I'm grateful for their work and to the many other academics who submitted proposals and to those involved in the peer review.

The papers have been debated at a conference and are going through a peer-review as we speak. I hope to publish them in the coming weeks.

I want to share a few talking points about the far right.

I have commissioned 3 papers – one giving an overview of the far right, one looking at the mainstreaming of the far right and one focused on National Action, and the links between far right, extremism and terrorism.

The papers underline the complexity of the far right and the need for a nuanced understanding of shared narratives but also the differences – in ideology as well as methods.

It's important to distinguish groups like National Action whose stated commitment to a more explicit and 'pure' form of nationalism and whose embrace of violence marks them out from the patchwork of radical right activists who have emerged in the last few years.

This must go hand-in-hand with a better understanding of the relationship between ideology and violence, looking for example at how the group transitioned from non-violent to violent.

At the other end of the spectrum, I was struck by the complex relationship between radical right activists and the mainstreaming of certain ideas, such as political correctness, anti-elitism and anti-Muslim hatred.

In fact, as one of our papers argues, one of the reasons the modern far right is resonating beyond its traditional base is because they sidestepped the cordon sanitaire by adopting these populist platforms.

This is not a comfortable thing to think about.

But recognising the role that wider societal beliefs can play in normalising extremism is an important first step.

What more we should do

We have engaged widely, we've gathered important evidence and we're now looking at how we can improve our response to extremism.

I believe we need a whole society response and a better, more nuanced counter-extremism toolkit.

In 2015 the government brought out the first counter extremism strategy.

It was a landmark moment, which drove work at a national and local level – including creating the network of excellent local coordinators and funding

some vital community work.

But we have to ask, has the strategy itself kept pace with the changing threat of extremism, does it acknowledge the complexity of the harms and does it give us the toolkit of responses we need?

And how can we make sure we do this in a way that not undermine the human rights principles that are vital for the wellbeing of a democratic society?

But challenging extremism isn't just a job for government.

I've asked councils and the police if they have the tools they need to deal with the dangerous radical right activism we've seen in recent years.

It's crucial that we all stand up and speak out.

Some of the most effective pushbacks I have seen have come from community groups or individuals.

As many counter-extremists have told me and through my own experience of running a civil society organisation, I know we need a strong network of support (including emotional support) and long-term and sustainable funding.

But what should we do in response to a mainstreaming of hateful or intolerant ideas?

I believe countering extremism requires more not less debate.

I've come across many innovative approaches which have allowed those attitudes to be challenged.

Only recently I was shown a powerful example of how to bring together young people in FR and Islamist circles for mediated dialogue.

I've seen powerful evidence and spoken to youth workers who stress on the need for safe spaces to discuss difficult subjects including racist views.

It is in this context – of the need to open the debate, not shut it down – that I'd like to turn to the definition of Islamophobia or anti-Muslim hatred.

As I said at the start I am incredibly concerned by the threat of the violent far right, the harm caused by non-violent radical right activists and a wider mainstreaming of anti-Muslim hatred.

As a Muslim woman in the public eye I have experienced this hatred first hand for many years.

The question of a definition is being debated in parliament tomorrow.

This morning police chiefs have raised concerns about a definition proposed by the All Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims.

Matthew and Will make the case for a definition with a tighter focus.

I support the need to have a definition.

A definition can help provide clarity and help us challenge better anti-Muslim hatred.

The far right exploit the lack of an agreed understanding of anti-Muslim prejudice to continue to propagate their hatred which they then disguise as 'free speech.'

It is vital that any definition is tested to ensure there are no unintended outcomes; or that the rights and freedoms of others are not suppressed.

I recently brought together a group representing the diversity of British Muslims but whose voices aren't often included in the debate – many of whom also actively challenge extremism.

The discussion raised a couple of serious concerns with the APPG definition.

Firstly, it fails to acknowledge the hate faced by minorities within minorities – such as LGBTQ+ Muslims, the Ahmadiyya Community or those who simply want the right to follow their faith in their own way.

The APPG definition talks about 'perceived Muslimness'.

But to those Muslims I spoke to, it is precisely their 'Muslimness' which is called into question by Islamist Extremists, which has led to hate and threats directed at them.

We must challenge the view propagated by Islamist extremists and far right extremists: the old-fashioned, monolithic and highly erroneous view of British Muslims, who continue to be depicted as a singular "Muslim community," who possess a singular view.

It is important that we listen to the breadth and diversity of views of individuals like these.

Many feel the space to challenge or hold differing views is shrinking and there is a genuine fear that by not conforming to a particular view, abuse is often the end result.

Secondly, an ambiguous definition may have the unintended consequence of making it impossible to expose and challenge Islamist extremism. I've spoken to countless politicians, journalists and campaigners who have the word 'Islamophobe' slung at them as they attempt to counter Islamist extremism.

This has been a growing phenomenon in our country which is designed to such down legitimate debate on Islamist extremism and vital counter extremism work, and as Lead Commissioner I am alarmed by this.

This is an important debate – but one sadly which slips into personal attacks and non-negotiable positions.

I look forward to hearing more about CARR's work on this and I congratulate

them on publishing this report. We need more debate not less.

That is why forums such as this are so important.

Countering extremism is one of the challenges of our time.

We cannot ignore the growing threat of violent far right extremism.

We have to do more to challenge the dangerous and harmful activism of radical right campaigners and protests – both online and offline.

And we have to wake up to the mainstreaming of hate and intolerance – whether it's antisemitism, anti-Muslim hatred or any other form of prejudice.

We will only be able to do this if we work together and support each other to do more to reduce the appeal and harm of extremism.

I want to see academics and NGOs partner and join forces to make sure work on the ground is underpinned by robust evaluation, and that best practice is shared widely.

This lies at the heart of a whole society response.

So thank you to CARR for inviting me and for hosting such an important conference. I am sure it will be a great success.