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Islamophobia – what's in a name?

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First came a report from the Quilliam Foundation calling for the term Islamophobia to be replaced due to the widespread confusion about what it actually means and how it should be used. Despite having been part of the social and political lexicon for almost a decade and half now, Quilliam recommend 'anti-Muslim prejudice', 'anti-Muslim bigotry' or 'anti-Muslim hatred'.

Then Baroness Warsi – employing Quilliam's preferred terminology – has made a speech stating she will use her position in the Government to tackle 'anti-Muslim prejudice'. This was necessary, she argued, because such prejudices had passed the 'dinner table test'. Anti-Muslim prejudice had become socially acceptable.

The fact is that, Warsi's comments acknowledge nothing new. Since the publication of the influential Commission for British Muslims & Islamophobia (CBMI) report in 1997, Islamophobia has been recognised as being a part of the fabric of everyday life in Britain. That report said that it was becoming 'more explicit, more extreme and more dangerous'.
My own research on behalf of the European Monitoring Centre on Xenophobia and Racism (EUMC) into Islamophobia in the EU in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 noted something quite different. Following 9/11, Islamophobia – a diverse and extremely broad range of anti-Muslim, anti-Islam attitudes, expressions, prejudices and discriminatory or exclusionary practices – was identified as becoming increasingly 'normal'. Whether explicit or implicit, with normality came acceptability.

Almost a decade on and my book, 'Islamophobia' (Ashgate, 2010) confirms this. Instead of becoming 'more explicit, more extreme and more dangerous', the opposite has occurred: Islamophobia has become taken for granted, seemingly natural and widely accepted. To use Warsi's words, Islamophobia has most definitely passed the dinner table test.

And yes, despite Quilliam's dislike of the term, it is Islamophobia. Quilliam's argument for rejecting the term Islamophobia is that it is confusing, hampers legitimate and valid criticism of Islam and Muslims, and has made it difficult to recognise or identify genuine Islamophobic incidents. At times, all of these are true. But these would be true irrespective of whether the term 'Islamophobia', 'anti-Muslim prejudice' or anything else was being used. Putting the wolf in sheep's clothing fails to change the nature of the events.

Without addressing what is required – the need for a clear definition and understanding of what is and is not Islamophobia – the same confusion, misuse and so on will continue. What is worse is that once again, tackling the real problem will be overlooked.
As my book argues, we need for a new definition of Islamophobia to be established. As part of this, there is the need to differentiate between Islamophobia as an ideology that informs and shapes our speech, attitudes and thoughts, and an Islamophobia that results in a series of exclusionary and discriminatory practices. If the Government is genuine in its commitment to finally tackling Islamophobia, then this latter point is particularly crucial.

However, one point has to be stressed about the motivations of Quilliam. I contest the statement that Islamophobia 'hands a propaganda coup to Islamists'. In over a decade of research into the phenomenon, I have found no evidence that 'Islamists' – a term that many Muslims and non-Muslims find highly contentious – are using the term to their own ends. Conflating Islamophobia with 'Islamist extremism' is also extremely dangerous. Doing so can indirectly legitimise the lazy stereotypes that equate all Muslims as terrorists and feed into the messages of those such as the English Defence League. Such associations are therefore unnecessary and unwanted and if the phenomenon is to be properly addressed, then it is time we moved beyond the naïve and immature assumption that Islamophobia will disappear if and when the threat and reality of 'Islamist extremism' is eradicated. As the 1997 CBMI report proves, Islamophobia pre-dates 9/11, 7/7 et al.

Baroness Warsi's comments must therefore be welcomed. Taking Islamophobia seriously – of which anti-Muslim prejudice is one part – is long overdue.

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