

‘ISD RESPONSE TO UK GOVERNMENT EXTREMISM DEFINITION’

After years of political neglect, a new government extremism definition finally centres the threat to human rights from identity-based hate. But in a uniquely polarised context and with communities feeling under threat, government cannot underestimate the importance of proactively building public trust, community buy-in and bipartisan consensus, to avoid this announcement seeming like a political stunt.

The UK government is introducing a long overdue update of its definition of extremism. Gone is the much maligned ‘British values’-based conception - rooted in unusably vague references to ideals of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law, presented as somehow unique to the UK. And in comes an approach framed around extremism’s threat to human rights and social cohesion, rooted in concrete harms to communities such as violence, hatred and intolerance.

Such a shift is to be welcomed. ISD has long argued – including through its work as expert advisors to the original Counter Extremism Commission – for a human rights-based definition of extremism. ISD’s own [working definition](#) frames extremism as a supremacist system of belief based on the superiority of an identity group. By this 'social identity' conception, extremism— which can be pursued through violence, or mainstreamed through politics and social change — is fundamentally antithetical to pluralism and the universal application of fundamental rights and freedoms.

It is positive to see this new framing of extremism firmly rooted in the real threat of ideological violence, hatred and intolerance, to rights and freedoms, democratic institutions and civic culture. An approach focused on the concrete behaviours exhibited by extremists and the real-world impacts of these behaviours on victims, should help avoid intractable definitional debates. But a narrow focus on 'ideology' alone will be challenged by an ever more [hybridised](#) extremism environment, where radicalisation threats are increasingly characterised more by participation in amorphous violent online ecosystems rather than membership of specific groups.

The government’s new definition also includes those who “intentionally create a permissive environment” for extremists. So far, little guidance has been provided on how this would be applied in practice, and how it will be ensured that those who inadvertently or unknowingly provide a platform for extremists will not be penalised.

Beyond its composition, the viability of any definition requires extremism to be framed in absolute terms rather than in relation to a movable mainstream, to be implemented in a genuinely ideologically agnostic fashion, and to be completely free from any party politicisation. The only way this can be achieved is through wide consultation, deep buy-in and trust building with civil society, especially given extremism’s deep community impacts. Meaningful engagement, particularly with Muslim communities who may be disproportionately impacted, has unfortunately not taken place in the development of this

definition.

While it is essential cross-governmental action on extremism is underpinned by a clear, consistent and proportionate definition of extremism, sustainable definitions cannot just exist as technical guidance for government engagement with communities. Having been effectively sidelined under subsequent leaders, such a definition should be used as a launchpad for a renewed long-term counter extremism strategy, which confronts an increasingly ‘mainstreamed’ extremism threat across the ideological spectrum. Such an effort will necessarily require proactive investment in communities— not as a means to a securitised end— but as part of a renewed commitment to positive prevention programming.

Finally, the success of an effective extremism definition means much more discipline in clamping down on politicians’ casual application of extremism terminology to legitimate causes— such as climate activism and the mainstream of pro-Palestinian protests— which risks relativising such sensitive and significant terms in the public sphere. In a political environment where terms like ‘Islamist’ have been wielded with abandon against public figures on the [receiving end](#) of extremist death threats, it is crucial for our democratic civic culture that all of society is working from a shared basis on extremism, rooted in respect for human rights.

ISD spokespeople are available to provide expert commentary around this extremism announcement.