Politicians’ ‘inflammatory language’ part of failure to tackle extremism, UK report finds

Ben Quinn, The Guardian, Mon 9 Dec 2024

Politicians have been criticised for using “inflammatory language” and peddling conspiracy theories in a report that finds government policies are failing to prevent extremism spreading and taking root in the UK. The report from Dame Sara Khan, a former counter-extremism commissioner, urges a “radical rethink” of how ministers tackle extremism amid a “chronic risk of democratic decline” due to conspiracy theories, worsening social cohesion and other threats.

Anger and grievances about the cost of living crisis as well as growing polarisation were among factors linked in the report to decreasing societal and democratic resilience in Britain.

Khan – who was Rishi Sunak’s independent adviser for social cohesion and resilience and the government’s counter-extremism commissioner under Theresa May and Boris Johnson – has sent the report to the home secretary, Yvette Cooper, in response to a government review of counter-extremism.

It calls for a reform of the Prevent programme so it solely focuses on stopping individuals being radicalised into terrorism and violent extremism with no responsibility for counter-extremism. The report says Prevent “is marred with questions about its effectiveness in preventing individuals from being drawn into terrorism and is enveloped in confusion about its role in countering extremism”.

It also refers to the role of elected figures using “inflammatory language or even extremist rhetoric, propagating conspiracies” or “engaging in ‘culture wars’”.

“Politicians clearly have an important role in what they say and the language they use,” Khan said. “If you are using language that talks about distrusting the police or attacking an ‘establishment’ in a certain way to whip up power or votes then you have to think about the long-term consequences of that.That’s contributing to this acceleration of decline of trust in our democracy and institutions and is going to cause serious, long-term decline. I am concerned that over recent years we’ve seen increasing numbers of politicians jump on the conspiracy theory bandwagon, spread disinformation online, or use inflammatory and divisive language. I won’t use names but people know who they are.”

This year the Reform UK leader, Nigel Farage, and other MPs including Richard Tice were criticised for comments about the police’s handling of the Southport killings. Both men have claimed there is “two tier” policing, with communities being treated differently.

Khan’s report, Societal Threats and Declining Democratic Resilience: The New Extremism Landscape, reviews existing research and finds:

- Twenty-nine percent of people in the UK believe in the “great reset” conspiracy theory that claims there are plans to impose a totalitarian world government.
- Forty-five percent of young men in the UK have a positive view of the misogynistic influencer Andrew Tate.
- One in 10 people shared the views of or sympathised with those who engaged in violent disorder and rioting during the summer.

The report, with the consultancy Crest Insights, says Keir Starmer’s government faces a “boiling pot” of issues including the cost of living crisis, concerns about immigration, global events such as the Gaza conflict and hostile foreign state interference.

Recommendations include establishing a Cabinet Office body to ensure Whitehall develops a strategic approach to preventing and measuring democratic decline. [...]