

Women and Equalities Committee

Oral evidence: Community cohesion, HC 340

Wednesday 12 November 2025

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Members present: Sarah Owen (Chair); Alex Brewer; David Burton-Sampson; Rosie Duffield; Dame Nia Griffith; Christine Jardine; Kim Leadbeater; Kevin McKenna; Rebecca Paul; Rachel Taylor; Nadia Whittome.

Questions 130 - 179

Witnesses

I: Peter Geoghegan, Journalist, Broadcaster, Writer; Sunder Katwala, Director, British Future; Misbah Malik, Senior Policy and Engagement Officer, HOPE not hate.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Peter Geoghegan, Sunder Katwala and Misbah Malik.

Chair: Good afternoon, and welcome to the Women and Equalities Committee. Today, we are holding an evidence session on community cohesion. It is part of our series of inquiries looking into community cohesion, which covers ethnicity, race, integration, misogyny in the manosphere, and the social fabric of our society. Today, we will hear from Sunder Katwala, director of British Future, Misbah Malik, senior policy and engagement officer at HOPE not hate, and Peter Geoghegan, writer, broadcaster, journalist, and probably other things as well. Welcome to you all, and thank you so much for coming. We are really looking forward to this session; we know it will be really interesting. I will hand over to Kim.

Q130 **Kim Leadbeater:** Good afternoon, everybody. Sunder, Misbah and Peter, thank you very much for joining us. Sunder, we have worked together previously through British Future, and it is lovely to see you again. Misbah, I am very aware of the work of HOPE not hate. Today is my first session on the Committee, so I am learning as I go, but I would love to hear your thoughts on a couple of particular issues. It is a year now since the 2024 summer riots that we sadly saw. How would you describe the current state of community cohesion? I will start with you, Sunder.

Sunder Katwala: Thanks very much for the invitation. In a word, I would say fractious. This is a more anxious, more divided society than any of us would want it to be. We can all agree on that, even if we have different views about the causes, consequences and remedies. British Future is a charity, a non-partisan think-tank. Since we submitted evidence to this Committee, we did a whistle-stop tour of all the nations and regions to hear and get a shared view.

If you want something positive, there is mostly a sense of local pride in place and local resilience. Obviously, things can make that harder. There is much more anxiety and a sense of disconnection when we start to talk about the state of the nation. That is a contrast I would draw. There is economic pressure and volatile politics nationally and internationally. The online environment is changing. There are lots of pressures that test the quality of our relationships with each other. We would like those to be strong; we believe in them being strong with the people we know, but we are currently quite anxious about them, whatever our political views.

Q131 **Kim Leadbeater:** That is really helpful, thank you. Misbah, would you say that things are getting better or worse? You probably know this issue is very close to my heart. Next year will be 10 years since the murder of my sister, Jo Cox, the MP for Batley and Spen. The culture then was very divisive and toxic, and we are nearly a decade down the line. Are things getting better or worse, and, importantly, what could some solutions be?



Misbah Malik: To your question, the answer is yes and no. If we think about what happened this summer with all the protests around asylum accommodation and the Raise the Colours campaign, it was not surprising that the same issues and actors drove the volatility, violence and protests that we saw in the 2024 riots and have seen since. It is the same drivers that are not being addressed that are exacerbating it and becoming worse. If these issues are not addressed, they will get worse and worse every single year because you will have new trigger points and flashpoints that mobilise the people who want to engage in this sort of activity. In many ways, it is worse, particularly once you add in the effects of social media. It will become more of a problem and a way that this extrapolates even further.

None the less, I echo Sunder in saying that what that is better is that we see great grassroots mobilisation and resilience building at a local level. With the riots in particular, we saw violence break out locally, but we also saw radical displays of hope and solidarity with people coming together to rebuild walls, share food and provide protection for their neighbours who felt under threat. In the year since the riots, what I saw filled me with a lot of hope for the potential of grassroots organisations to fill this gap. If this can be nurtured and, crucially, funded, it is a way out of the spiral where we see attitudes and relationships getting worse.

That answers the second half of your question about solutions. We can get more into that later, but the top line is that the solutions are at the local level and work is already being done, whether that is strengthening social connection, building community power or increasing financial security. Those solutions are already happening. It is about investing in and supporting organisations to continue to do great work.

Q132 **Rachel Taylor:** Sunder, I will ask you first: are the immigration protests we have seen in Britain driven purely by anti-immigration sentiment, or are there are other factors?

Sunder Katwala: When people think about immigration or asylum, they have lots of different things in mind. They have different views on immigration. People take part in protests about asylum hotels for different reasons. Some are just very unsympathetic to asylum seekers in general; others are more unsympathetic to those who come in boats. If there is a local incident in Epping, for example, people worry about safety for that reason, and you might get a more mainstream group.

In our research, we found that about a quarter of people are against asylum in principle; many more are for it when it is managed well but not in favour of it being managed badly. A sixth to a quarter of society are highly sympathetic to asylum, so you can certainly have a very polarised debate. People will have different views about other questions of immigration. We would say most people are balancers about immigration in general. There are pressures of high immigration for housing, but there are gains for the NHS. Most people are sympathetic to refugees when we think we control it well and know why people are here.



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Those protests are part of the picture, and people have a right to protest peacefully. Some are not there to act peacefully, and so the police have a job to make sure protesters take their masks off, stay in a designated area, and are not there to threaten the asylum-seekers or to fight the police or even, they hope, another group. The debate about how people behave decently when they protest is a different question from how a Government would get confidence from broad society in handling asylum well. You will probably not quite reach many of the people who protest outside hotels with signs.

Q133 Kim Leadbeater: Peter, do you have anything to add in terms of the motivations behind those protests?

Peter Geoghegan: I defer to my colleagues who know a lot more about the community cohesion side of it. It is striking—we touched on this—that we have seen a growth of these movements post covid, in an era of increasingly polarised social media and increasingly polarised rhetoric coming from other countries. We talk a lot about Russia, China and foreign influence, but we do not talk as much about the influence on our politics of the radical right in the United States. You have people such as Elon Musk, who owns Twitter. Sky News recently did a very interesting investigation—I commend my colleagues on that work, and if people have not seen it, have a look at it—which shows just how much Twitter is pushing things to the far right. Similarly, John Burn-Murdoch at the *Financial Times* did some interesting work on this; academics are looking at this too. We cannot deny this is happening.

You have a President in the White House whose Vice-President, JD Vance, has actively said he wants to get involved in pushing not just British but European politics to the right. This is real; this is happening. This week we have a President who is threatening to sue the BBC for \$1 billion. These are not fanciful things. We have a former Prime Minister, albeit short-lived, Liz Truss, who was the guest of honour this summer at Liberty University, probably the most hardline, extreme Christian, right university in the United States and very much tied in with what we see in culture wars. Elon Musk appeared by video link at the Tommy Robinson rally talking about funding British politics. This is all real. As Maya Angelou said, “When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time.” These people have shown a desire to get involved in our politics. I am no expert sociologist in terms of what is driving protests, but the move online and the way in which social media is controlled by a handful of tech billionaires who are increasingly close to Donald Trump does not seem a coincidence to me.

Chair: We will come on to explore that a bit deeper in a little while.

Q134 Rachel Taylor: Misbah, should people attending those rallies and demonstrations be categorised politically? Are they far-right marches?

Misbah Malik: It is a tricky question. Over the summer in particular, we saw that those attending these protests were not wholly your EDL



stereotype; there were lots of women and children. There was a big push particularly for the Unite the Kingdom rally to be seen as family-friendly. We saw protests outside hotels with kids' entertainers and music being played, so there is definitely an attempt to change how these things are perceived.

Most of the people who attend these rallies will not see themselves as far-right, racist or even anti-immigration. The majority will not be part of any formal far-right organisation or group. HOPE not hate has written a lot about what we call the post-organisational far right, where we see an increasingly blurred line between what is mainstream and what is far right. Particularly important here is the role of social media, which means that you do not need an official membership of a far-right organisation to engage in the politics of it; you can dip in and out when you want. This creates a really tricky issue, because people might not be signed up to groups in a formal manner, but at the same time, if you echo and parrot what is very clearly far-right ideology and narratives, that is another question in and of itself.

It is also important to remember that the motivations for people coming to these protests are very different. Piggybacking off what Sunder said, at HOPE not hate, we talk about a spectrum, particularly in terms of conversations about what is legitimate political discourse versus racism. There is a big difference between being in opposition to migration in the form of it being incidental, so you are in opposition to the way migration is currently playing out and the impacts of that on a very tangible level, versus an ideological opposition to the concept of migration and immigration.

On the incidental side of things, people are concerned about scarcity and cost of living and this "Hotel Britain" argument, which you could say falls more into the legitimate political discourse. At the more extreme ideological end is where you have questions and narratives about cultural incompatibility. That is where Christian nationalism falls heavily into things and narratives about re-migration play out. Then, in the middle, you have concern about women's safety, the so-called pink protests, where it is very legitimate to worry about violence against women and girls, but we have seen that co-opted to justify racism, and that is where you get this muddy middle.

Q135 Rachel Taylor: That bears out the correspondence I get in my mailbag from people who say, "Don't categorise us all as being members of the far right for wanting to protest," but it is important we look at the impact of those demonstrations on ethnic minority groups and their sense of belonging and safety in this country. Could you talk a little about that?

Misbah Malik: To be honest, we do not necessarily deal directly with those communities, so I am probably not best to answer this. But when we think about the Raise the Colours campaign and the impact that had on communities across the country, when it is accompanied by racist graffiti and attempts to mark territory, when it is organised by people



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who have spewed racist and derogatory rhetoric, that raises massive questions about what it means to be British. Increasingly, we see this condensing of what people define as British identity and what it means to be a contributing member of society and someone who is welcome here. The issue is becoming more and more divisive and exclusionary, which raises very legitimate concerns for a lot of communities about, "Are we welcome here?" Once you get down that track, it gets really dangerous.

Sunder Katwala: On the broader question, you ask how we categorise and understand that, but flags in particular are very important; they are very meaningful symbols. When my daughter was in year 9, they looked at a poem which said, "It is just a piece of cloth." Well, it is and it is not. People from majority and minority groups want to be able to fly flags. Flags have a different meaning in terms of context and the intent in which they are used and in the context and the intent with which they are received.

I had face paint on with my daughters to watch the England Lionesses win the tournament with 60,000 people waving the flags on The Mall. You could not have a more inclusive thing. The same red cross that is daubed on the road sign at the end of my street after a protest has a completely different meaning and intent. I live in Dartford. There is excellent bunting in the high street; there is an excellent parade on St George's Day. It is the same flag and it is fine, the lampposts are a bit different to the bunting. You can put flags on your house and car. I put flags on my car until the team get knocked out, and then I take the flags down. I do not put them up all the time.

The flags halfway up the lampposts look a bit sad—they are there for whatever reason—but there is a difference between asking people to fly flags on cars and conscripting the lampposts, which is much more about the marking of territory that is familiar in Belfast, for example. It is about saying, "This is ours" and "This is not ours."

If people fly the St George's flag and the Union flag, actually the latter carries less threat because it has lots of meanings when we use it well, and some people use it in that way. The England flag does not carry much threat in a football context, but in terms of why somebody has used it when it does not feel inclusive, the answer is not to retreat or reject flags; it is to show how to fly them well in a way that brings people together.

Pride can unite England; prejudice cannot. We have to use the moments of next year—St George's Day in particular and the World Cup—to show how to fly our flags not just in a sporting context but in ways that bring us together. If other people do it in a different way, we can show that that is not how most of us use them.

Chair: We will come on to that in a minute. Nadia has a question around immigration elements in the protests, and then I have a follow-up.



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Q136 **Nadia Whittome:** I just wanted to pick up on something you said about how the majority would perhaps not consider themselves to be anti-immigration. It might be the case that the majority do not consider themselves to be far right, but on a march that is explicitly anti-immigration, do you not think that people would define themselves in this way?

Misbah Malik: Sorry, let me clarify. When I say the majority would not consider themselves anti-immigration, I mean in the ideological sense. A lot of people will say that they are anti-immigration in the incidental sense. They say, "I have no issue with people coming here; it is just that we need to house our homeless first. It is just that I can't get an NHS appointment. It is just that I can't get proper school places for my kids," and then they blame immigration as the cause of that.

Obviously, a lot of that is rooted in racism, and that is a problem in itself, but when we think about how to engage and bring people back, we need to make a very clear distinction in order to meet them where they are and understand where their concerns are rooted, so we can direct them towards the appropriate ways of dealing with matters. But I completely agree with what you say.

Q137 **Chair:** Sunder, I had a quick question about the impact of the anti-immigration protests. A lot has been said about what happened during them but not about where they did not take place, for example, Luton, which if you put it numerically or just look on paper, you would think this would be a place that would suffer from that. But these anti-immigration or Unite the Kingdom protests still have an impact on people's lives, even if it is not on their doorsteps. I heard from people who I say are self-censoring—young people call it code-switching—who have changed how they get from A to B, not wanting to use public transport, for example. We heard from Muslim women in Liverpool who do not want their loved ones to sit and wait at a bus stop anymore. Have you noticed people changing their lives and habits across the UK, not just in places that have seen the anti-immigration protests?

Sunder Katwala: People feel differently about not just local but national issues in the way you described. A couple of things have not been well noticed in the national conversation. People always ask, "Is it going to happen again?" The pattern of riots and violence in 2025 is very different from 2024. Last year, it tended to be places with relatively high deprivation and low diversity and with asylum dispersal. Those were the characteristics, and the violence was contained. Almost all those places were very quiet in 2025. There was a very different geography. That might be because some people went to prison, and others did not like what happened; it might be that there were good efforts in those local places to contain.

But much smaller asylum protest have popped up in more southern, affluent areas, and questions of cohesion are definitely national as well as local. The control of the borders is national issue, and the race norms



towards somebody who is young, black or Asian is a national not just a local question. Do we maintain the right boundaries? People might have views about what they think is happening in Birmingham or London when they live a long way away. You have to understand that the national message about who we are, who belongs, who does not, what is acceptable and what is not is an everywhere question.

To some extent, we have tended to see cohesion as local in places of high deprivation and high diversity. On the whole, places of high diversity work at cohesion and have the experience of contact; places 20 miles and 100 miles down the road have the news, but they do not work on the matter.

So we have to attend to the fact that people say, "It feels like the 1970s and 1980s racism," but of course the society is not that of the 1970s and 1980s. There would have been nobody of a black or Asian background in this House of Commons while they were debating Enoch Powell and the Race Relations Acts that were passed. Society has moved a long way over the generations, but some people are trying to re-legitimise racial slurs that we associate with a long time ago. We see older people—I am in my early 50s—saying, "I did not expect to see that again," and younger people are seeing it for the first time. We have to take that very seriously.

Q138 David Burton-Sampson: I want to talk more about Operation Raise the Colours. Thank you both, Misbah and Sunder, for your contributions. Peter, do you have any views on the national campaign to raise flags across the country?

Peter Geoghegan: On that issue, I will defer to my two colleagues. All I have is what I pick up from the mainstream media and from reading what I can. My two colleagues here know a lot more than I do.

Q139 David Burton-Sampson: Misbah, I must also declare I have done work with HOPE not hate in the past when I was a councillor and part of the Labour Party. Who do you think is driving this campaign, and to what extent do far-right groups and figures play a part?

Misbah Malik: It is a really good question. When we talk about the drivers of the flag campaign or the protest, there are two things happening at the same time: one is about who is driving the narratives, and one is about who is driving the organisation of the activity that goes on. When it comes to the narratives that underline the flags campaign and the protests, the far right and official far-right figures have played a huge role in normalising and mainstreaming not just anti-immigration but also anti-multiculturalism rhetoric more broadly. We have seen that in the rise of the re-migration narrative, particularly since the riots last year. It is no longer just about asylum; it is about diversity in general. The far right played a huge role in that.



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When it comes to the flag campaigns and the protest, again there are known far-right figures who amplify content that is posted and the campaign itself. Going back to the post-organisational far right and why it is so tricky now to define what is far right and what is not, a lot of the time these local campaigns are genuinely locally organised and they are genuinely locally led, so again we see that blurring between local and far right, which is really difficult.

More broadly in society, there has been a massive shift in the Overton window about what is acceptable to say and rally around. That is not just the case with the far right or Reform UK; we have seen it in the right of the Conservative Party as well. It played a huge role in normalising some of the rhetoric that underlies those campaigns, particularly when it is to do with Britishness, what it means to be British and who is included in that. It is a tricky question to answer. We have to split it between the narratives and the organising.

Q140 David Burton-Sampson: That is interesting. Sunder, I am interested in your views on that as well. Have you done any work around the impact assessment on how raise the flags has impacted local communities? I have seen a whole range of flags being simply put on lampposts to the extreme of people painting flags on buildings while abusing somebody walking past in a hijab with her children. There are different extremes, but have you seen any evidence of how this impacts local communities?

Sunder Katwala: There are a lot of conversations about it. There is a limited amount of research. There was a representative sample of what minorities think, which covered about 500 people. Views were quite divided about the matter. A quarter or third of the minority group said, "I like people flying flags for reasons of pride and patriotism," and others said, "I do not like it," but underneath that, many of the respondents said, "Context matters and intent matters, and you can feel it being done in different ways."

Obviously, you can see what is going on when there is violence, vandalism, painting it on restaurants and shops. It is also a challenge and a trap in a more mainstream way. Certainly, local people raise flags from motivations of, "I feel unheard, and I want to put my flag up." The mainstream question is, "Is there something wrong with our flag, the main flag that belongs to all the people? Do you want to take this down? Because if you do, I will then prove that I am not allowed to have national pride." You have to say, "Of course we are allowed to have national pride. How do we fly it, and who is it for?"

I would differentiate the two flags again. About 3% of people in our country think that black, Asian and mixed-race people cannot be British. Some of these will be the people flying the flag, but 97% of people think we ended that argument. If you fly it to intimidate somebody who is black or Asian, you can very clearly say, "You do not know the history of your country. You do not know the history of the world wars. You do not



know the history of that flag” and so we can tell a story about what that flag properly means and what history means.

I would like to say the same thing about the England flag, but it is slightly harder to make that case outside the sporting context, because not many institutions use the flag most of the time. You have a Church of England, but unfortunately we do not tend to have English institutions, so we have not normalised it outside a sporting context in the same way. We have to do that now. Nine out of 10 think that black and Asian people can also be English when they choose to be, especially if they are born here. That is important, but the people flying the flag do not know that, and so on. So while it is used in an intimidatory and racist way, we need to demonstrate its proper use rather than retreat from it as something that the rest of us will not use because some people want to use it in that way.

Q141 David Burton-Sampson: I have a final question, Misbah. Local authorities seem to have handled this in different ways with some taking the flags down and some saying, “We have a policy of them remaining up.” What is the right way to handle this situation?

Misbah Malik: It is really tricky. Unless it is accompanied by racist graffiti and there is a legitimate reason to remove them, for the most part we have said they should keep them up. It goes back to what Sunder said: a lot of the time these flags are put up because people want to get into a back-and-forth. They want to be able to say, “Look, we are being silenced. We are just proud of our identity, and it’s being taken away from us, and we’re not allowed to be proud about this or celebrate this,” so the majority of the time, we have advised local authorities to keep up the flags and not engage in that debate. Again, it is difficult when there is racist graffiti alongside it. Obviously, it must be removed. It depends. It is a really tricky situation.

Sunder Katwala: It is incredibly important then to have messaging and communication and the optics.

Misbah Malik: Absolutely, yes.

Sunder Katwala: It is great if, for example, a mosque wants to fly the Union flag that was put outside, but it is better if all groups want to do it together, including the minority groups, because that is what these flags mean to most of us. If they mean something else to a minority, let us be clear that the flag belongs to the whole population.

Q142 Kim Leadbeater: You talked a lot there about the English flag. How does that play out in the nations? For me, this is about identity. It is about multiple identities. I am a very proud Yorkshire woman. I am also proud to be English. I am proud to be British and lots of other identities as well. What does that look like in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland versus England? Are there differences?

Sunder Katwala: Right now, there are more asylum protests happening in Scotland than in England, which is surprising to the Scottish



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Government and Scottish political elite. If we look at opinion polls or the Brexit vote, Wales will have a very polarised election in which a lot of people vote Reform and Welsh nationalist. That is split by age and education. There is work to do.

There is a particular decision to use the England flag. There has been a mismemory to some extent, because for most of my lifetime the far right used the British flag, but it slightly lost its energy because we used it well, also since the so-called English Defence League decided it was a thing. But I never wanted to reclaim flags; I just want to use them well for most people.

These issues play out. People might use the national symbols. You can try to use the Saltire in that way, but that would be a pretty unfamiliar use. Just because Scotland has an elite public social good consensus on multi-ethnic Scottishness and immigration, it cannot ignore the fact that there has been an attempt to mobilise the same things for the same reasons in each of the nation's regions.

Northern Ireland is a uniquely different case. In a way, there has been more acknowledgement that there is identity conflict that needs to be managed. Maybe the rest of us need to understand a bit better how, instead of ignoring it, you name it, acknowledge it, and do something about it. Each devolved Government now have an understanding that they have to work at this.

Peter Geoghegan: I agree. It has been very interesting to see this in Scotland. Sunder is totally right. I worked in Scotland for many years and wrote a book about the Scottish referendum in 2015. It has been fascinating to watch how the Saltire has become contested in a way that it was not before. You now see the Saltire and the Union flag appearing simultaneously in parts of Glasgow; Maryhill in particular has seen a series of protests.

Sunder is right: the consensus in Holyrood for a long time has been very pro-immigration, as has the Scottish Government's position. The rhetoric has been very different. Whatever your views on the Scottish referendum in 2014 and the rhetoric around the independence campaign, it was definitely very different from the 2016 Brexit referendum in terms of how it was framed.

It is striking; this issue has taken quite a lot of Scottish politics by surprise, as has the rise of Reform in Scotland, where UKIP never polled well at all. It was seen very much as an English party, partly because they also wanted to abolish the Scottish Parliament, which Reform does not want to do. That might be part of it, but it is not the only reason. Some of the tendencies that we see in Wales are certainly working in Scotland as well. It has happened quite quickly in a way that has left the Scottish political establishment struggling to figure out exactly what is going on.



Chair: This is probably a perfect point to bring in our committee member, Nia Griffith.

Q143 **Dame Nia Griffith:** We have already touched on this a little, but I just wanted to explore a bit further. To what extent do you feel that social media and the very powerful algorithms that it now has are leading to the spread of extremist views? Do you want to start, Sunder?

Sunder Katwala: Social media is a significant part of it. In some ways, obviously it can only reflect things that are in society, but that slightly misunderstands what is going on, because social media also affects social norms. This has happened a lot more in the last three years and the last 12 months even than it has over this 10-year period. We are all adapting to the fact that we live online and offline.

A distinction I would make is that social media companies became more responsible about very basic norms of prejudice and hatred in 2019 around the time of the Christchurch mosque massacres in New Zealand. Twitter, Facebook and so on saw the way in which online cultures could lead to socialising terrible offline events, and they all did things about it to different extents.

In 2022 and 2024, most of that progress has reversed and the opposite has happened. For example, Twitter—now X—changed its ownership in 2020 and with that its policies. It has literally invited back the kinds of people it used to ban, for example, if they thought they were pro-violence, and taken away the teams that they built up. Take the 3% of people who do not really think black and Asian mixed-race people can be British; they have a very high share of voice these days on the platform that is X, and so they are now under the impression that a lot of people think that. That is not now just normalising that online; it is actually normalising what somebody thinks when they go offline.

If you asked me five years ago, I would have said we have very good norms in our society, classrooms and workplaces, but it is terrible now. Online boundaries need to be there. Just to give you a very specific example in terms of things that are unlawful, take the worst racial slur against south Asian people, a word that begins with P. It is used as abuse or harassment, mostly to people in the public eye, for example, the former Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, who is not from that ethnic background, or other people or journalists, especially women, where its use is more misogynistic. As an experiment, I reported over 100 examples of this being used in a way that is clearly criminal, but the platform leaves it up 95% of the time when it has a legal obligation to remove that content. When it is left up, and people can celebrate that and know they will not be caught, they normalise the behaviour that this is acceptable online and this should be done, and we want re-migration of all the migrants and all the minorities, and therefore you should harass them so they know you want them to go home.



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As an analogy to that, 85% of people thought the violence of the riots was bad; that is high but it is lower than you want. The 2% to 7% of people who thought, "We should justify a bit of it" were very excited by it and would like to see more of it. That group thought that most people thought the same thing, and so that is the social norm: the six out of 10 people who liked the violence of the riots and thought it was making a good point thought that most people were of the same opinion.

We are asking why people are talking about the racism of the 1970s and 1980s reappearing. It is because we have a mainstream space, especially X/Twitter, and Facebook to a lesser extent, where something that has been denormalised in our society has been normalised again. If you were part of the organisational far right, you used to go to your far-right meeting on a Thursday night and then go home and do other things. You can now live in this space 24/7. When you do that, people can tell you stories about how violence is coming, so you had better get ready for it.

That is not the whole solution in society; you want real contact with people, but if we do not act on that normalisation online, Ofcom could say, "You have a legal responsibility to remove it; please do so." The equalities Commission could also say, "If you are a woman or an ethnic minority in public life, you have a greater chance to have a top job than you would have had 10 years ago, but you will now have a more unequal experience of that in the last three years than you would have had five or 10 years ago." We are being robbed of the advance in our social norms, and that is real in our society because of this online problem.

Chair: You are not wrong there, Sunder. Did you notice everybody around this table nodded on that?

Q144 Dame Nia Griffith: Thank you for explaining so well the whole effect of the disproportionality that you encounter there. I do not know if others want to add anything. I should say, like my colleagues, I have worked with HOPE not hate.

Misbah Malik: I completely agree with everything that Sunder said, but also speaking from a more practical point of view on the role that social media plays in amplifying tensions, what we have seen this summer in particular and the way that the far-right works, is they are really good at jumping on and co-opting hyper-local issues. For example, if we think about the protest this summer, we had the issues in Epping with the case of violence against women and girls and the sexual assault, and we saw social media used to escalate that local issue into a national issue. Then we saw a string of copycat protests over the next couple of months and the morphing of it into a much broader movement

Social media allows momentum to be kept up. In local groups, we have seen the constant sharing of local issues happening in other areas being used to keep people alert, interested and invested. Particularly in the winter months when in-person activity drops off because it is cold and rainy, and no one wants to go out and stand outside a hotel, social media



allows people to still feel part of that community even if they do not meet every Saturday outside a hotel.

Piggybacking off your point, it is really worrying that people can be in this world 24/7 and draw in influences from other areas. A reason why the same issues keep cropping up over and over again is that they are not dealt with from a policy perspective, and that constant media stream is never-ending.

Peter Geoghegan: Effectively, algorithms have turned extremism into a profitable business, particularly over the last few years. We now see that you can make money online by being extreme. Basically, the internet runs on anger and outrage, which is the fuel of extremism. A lot of the other things you are talking about here are fueled by that. Particularly the lack of any algorithmic accountability from social media companies. Big tech has allowed them to develop algorithms that drive more and more extreme content, because it drives more and more eyeballs. This is the TikTokification of social media, which is not happening just on TikTok; it is happening across the piece.

Since Elon Musk took over Twitter, we have seen a step change in this. Tens of millions of pounds on Twitter alone has been generated by extremists just putting out their content. This has real effects. A few years ago, Tommy Robinson, through money from America, rebranded himself as a citizen journalist. He was allowed back on to X, where he now has 1.5 million followers on X. It has gone up three or fourfold in about 18 months. That will generate huge amounts of money for Tommy Robinson. This is how it works. The algorithms have turned it into a profitable industry. This is before we even start talking about things like AI and the disinformation waves that we already see. It can bring foreign content that has been created anywhere. We are already seeing that happening, where content created in other countries affects our political discourse here. That plays a big part in why this is happening; it is because it is profitable

In my reporting, I have met young people who now describe themselves as citizen journalists, who go out to somewhere like Epping and other places, start filming and the next thing you know, they have 60 million, 70 million or 80 million views on Twitter. They have a couple of hundred thousand people following them on YouTube. That is money. Once that income stream has started, you will continue to do what you need to do to keep it going. That income stream fuels those sorts of people and also helps to produce someone like Tommy Robinson and the marches that we have seen.

These are the economics of social media. At the same time, the platforms have become less transparent. It is easy to talk about Twitter, but it is not just that platform: Facebook and other platforms used to talk a lot about accountability and said it would be open and share its APIs, but that has all gone. The brologarchs are in the tent with Donald Trump.



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They are in the back of the taxi with Donald Trump. They are sitting next to him on inauguration day and funding his campaigns. That is a huge part of what we are seeing.

Q145 Dame Nia Griffith: To follow up a little on that, I have two main questions. Does the power of those algorithms create complacency in the rest of society because they are not fed the same things, so they are not aware of the extent and the power? Secondly, we talked about US influence. Do you think there are other hostile state actors that use conspiracy theories or disinformation to disrupt society?

Peter Geoghegan: On the complacency point, I must admit, I am surprised that a lot of people still use X as a platform to communicate. I am surprised the British Government still do. I still have an account because if you close it, it becomes slightly difficult and it can be squatted on. I was surprised to see my invitation to this Committee was on X. This platform does not like this Committee. The people behind X do not want everything that you talk about here. They want to push you all into the sea. It is worth recognising and acknowledging that.

Sunder picked up on this earlier: if people are on X, it changes how they perceive the world around them. This happens with politicians. We have not mentioned GB News, a broadcaster that exists to put clips on X and social media to give and push debates in very extreme positions. It now has a US show that openly calls for Trump's America to save Britain. This is a very different discourse, but people in that world do not go down to their local pub to have a conversation with someone who says, "Look, it's not really like that, mate. That is not what the world is like out there." So they are able to believe it.

But that complacency does not extend just to "ordinary people." That complacency—it might not even be the right word; it is an echo chamber; it is a groupthink—is embedded in certain people. Elon Musk is the greatest example. This is a man who got high on his own supply. Musk is not the only person in the tech billionaire crew who clearly does not engage with the real world in a way that most of us in this room would understand. That is partly a factor of an algorithmic world. You are constantly served up content that not just reinforces your own views but pushes you further to the extreme. We have seen this with YouTube, which is a radicalisation hole. Once you start typing in, "Are vaccines safe?" give it a couple of days, and you will get every single anti-vax thing, and then you are down the rabbit hole. I have friends and family who have gone down it, and I am sure many sitting around this table have too. This is real.

Q146 Dame Nia Griffith: Do you see conspiracy theories as a vehicle for pushing far-right ideology?

Peter Geoghegan: I do not think it is a coincidence—again I am not a sociologist—that we see so much of this in the wake of covid, people spending a lot of time online, scepticism about Government and vaccines,



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and all that stuff. It was a chaotic moment in every country; that was the nature of what happened. It is fascinating that you do not have to believe all the conspiracy theories.

I went to the Reform party conference. I was struck that somebody on stage said that Prince Charles got cancer because of a vaccination. The person who said that has done so multiple times; it is not a coincidence. This was not a new thing where one says, "Wow, I am really shocked this person said this." This person has a track record for saying this. Political parties and politicians also need to be cognisant of when they are leaning into conspiracy theories because they really matter.

What is fascinating about conspiracy theories is you do not have to back every one; you just have to back a few, and the conspiracy theory world will follow. Online has become that place. We have not talked about the decline and trust in my industry—the media—and the things that we see even this week with the BBC. This all plays into it; it is all part of it. The information ecosystem has changed. It is not a printing press. I could be wrong, but I do not think Gutenberg made a lot of money out of his invention, whereas there are people making a humongous amount of money out of the way our information ecosystem is changing.

Q147 **Chair:** On that, I just wanted to follow up on a couple of points. I came off X last year. My life is infinitely better, and my team's lives are infinitely better; they do not have to continually report threats of violence and hatred. My view of the world is slightly brighter as well. I am interested to hear what you are saying about whether you think the Government should stop using X. For me, I chose to do it because I did not want to continue to legitimise a platform that is profiting from hatred, but also I thought, what do I talk about? What do I care about, particularly as I have just become the Chair of this Committee? Could I ever have a sensible discussion about periods? Could I have a sensible discussion about puberty blockers? Could I have a sensible discussion about race, or equalities in general on X? Absolutely not.

We also had a look at the people who were engaging. A lot of politicians and media outlets are worried about the engagement dropping off. Is it true engagement on X anymore, or is it foreign bots? Is it state-owned bots? Is it just trolls? Is it true engagement? What would you be saying to the Government now about their use of X, because I do not see it as a mainstream outlet, I actually see it as a bit of an extreme outlet.

Sunder Katwala: Before we debate individual choices, which everyone can make, and governmental choices at national or local level, my first priority would be that—whether you are staying or you are coming off it—we have to make it lawful again. It is currently clearly in breach of legal obligations under the new legislation around online safety, but it is also in breach of long-standing obligations under the 2010 Equality Act. It has to give me, you, and everyone on this Committee an equal service based on our characteristics. If it always upholds a racial slur and defends it, then it is not doing that. So, make it lawful.



It is probably in the interests of western democracies that want western democratic values to build up alternative spaces as well. There might be a political debate about whether we are boycotting it, or we are not boycotting it, or we have left it. But if you look at Elon Musk as a billionaire with very radicalised personal views these days, retweeting the kinds of people he should be removing, it is in our interest to build up the alternative spaces. If they made it legal again, it might be appropriate to advertise, not advertise, be on it, and so on, but it also might be better to use another space.

Q148 Chair: Before you come in, Peter, I just wanted to come back to that point about making it a safe space. We have the Online Safety Act 2023, Ofcom will have the powers to fine non-compliance by £12 million, which as far as I am concerned is a drop in the ocean for Elon Musk. Do you think we have enough powers to hold social media companies to account?

Sunder Katwala: It is easier than you think to deal with the unlawful stuff. The extreme stuff that is lawful is another point. At the moment, all the companies co-operate quite well on child sexual exploitation, even the really terrible companies.

Chair: Apart from Snapchat.

Sunder Katwala: You will know more about it, yes. Many of them will operate well at a certain type and level of terrorism because there are tools they are applying. Then there is other stuff, such as very misogynistic harassment of women and racist abuse. Take the example of the P-word slur, because it has a very British political context, it probably does not have all the same flags on it that the N-word might have, which has a broader global thing.

There are powers. If there is a decision—which I hope there is not—in the Government or somewhere else to say, “That person is so rich, powerful, and politically connected to the White House these days that we cannot uphold the rule of law on his platform,” we have to get people to say that out loud and then say, “Well, we’ve got to uphold the rule of law.”

To get rid of the stuff that is lawful and extreme will be harder. But it will make a big difference because, for example, to make it lawful you would have to have some human beings as well as AI looking at the indefensible decisions. Before Musk owned Twitter, it was possible—not because the system was good—to get hold of the UK team and say to them, “This is going to go very badly for you in the House of Commons, or in the media, so you’d better do something about it.” They were doing something about the very worst stuff. They have stopped doing that now.

Q149 Chair: That is absolutely what we have heard in terms of evidence from this session. We have heard from Jewish community organisations, Muslim community organisations and women that it basically just does not respond anymore. I want to give you a chance to respond as well, Peter. You are absolutely right in terms of what you say about Elon Musk



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as a person. It is not just wanting to be involved in British politics, but it has expressly said it wants to control British politics. How are we continuing to deem this as some sort of mainstream political tool?

When you take Elon Musk's words about the people who ordinarily would not get involved in politics and just want to live their lives, he said, "My message to them is if this continues violence is going to come to you. You will have no choice. You're in a fundamental situation here where whether you choose violence or not, violence is coming to you. You either fight back or you die. You either fight back or you die. That is the truth today." If somebody had said that televised on to the streets of London wearing a military uniform instead of a tech bro outfit, would we be in a different situation from the one we are in now?

Peter Geoghegan: We need to be really cognisant of the fact that Elon Musk, for example, but he is not the only one, has shown a real interest in getting involved in our politics. This is what is happening; this is what they are doing; this is what this is. This is an attempt to influence British politics. It is an attempt by a US citizen, a US tech billionaire, to influence British politics. The story about him giving \$100 million to Reform may be real; it may not be. He said he would be willing to fund another British radical right party and Tommy Robinson. This is somebody who will get involved even more in our politics. We have a general election in the coming years. It might happen not next year, it might not happen the year after, but it is going to happen. Do we think that this man is going to sit back and do nothing in this context?

There is an Elections Bill that is going to come before the Houses of Parliament in the coming months. Currently that Elections Bill does not do anywhere near enough to stop someone like Elon Musk directly funding into British politics. He could still give \$100 million to anybody he wants through UK branches of British companies that he controls. As it is currently drafted, the Elections Bill will not stop that; it will not stop Elon Musk. At the same time, he can massively indirectly influence our politics by the way he uses X and allows X to be used, and Grok, his AI tool, which is also the way people are increasingly getting information in the AI age.

These are really huge. The quote you have read out there, Sarah, is exactly what his position is. He has not in any way hidden it. He is very open about it. So far, we are not doing anything in terms of using what tools we have to combat it and thinking about what tools we need for the future to try to combat this.

Q150 **Chair:** What would the Government need to do to stop somebody like Elon Musk, or other foreign nationals, coming and not seeking to influence or be involved in our British politics but to overthrow or control our British politics? What do we need to do as a Government? Peter?

Peter Geoghegan: It depends. If we are talking about direct funding of politics, the simplest way to try to stop all this is to cap political



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donations. Trying to stop foreign donations is a bit of a whack-a-mole issue: who is foreign? Who is not? Who is using British companies? Who is not? Capping political donations at a sensible level will take some money out of British politics. That will be a start. It will not be a solution to everything, but it would be a really important start.

Elon Musk will not be the only one. Think about what it is going to look like six months out from the British general election. The American right, in particular, are really deep-pocketed people. Our politics is cheap by comparison. Someone throwing £10 million, £20 million or £30 million into British politics can make a humongous difference. In America that is chicken feed, frankly; it is nothing. Elon Musk gave £300 million to the Republicans and Trump in 2024. These are people who are used to it, and they know that money can massively sway political processes. We must use the Elections Bill as a time and opportunity to cap political donations and start taking some money out of it.

Secondly, we need to be really cognisant of the indirect influence on British politics. We have seen a real rise of what I call dark money, which really means that we cannot see where it comes from, coming into British politics. We are seeing the rise of something we have not talked about as much before called donor-assisted funds. They are a really big way of funding politics in America, and they are rising in Britain. What they basically mean is you get a tax break when you put money into one of these funds. The money that goes in is anonymised, and the recipient does not have to declare where the money came from.

We can see this is happening in Britain already. Charities can get money through donor-assisted funds. The biggest one in Britain has given about £1.5 million to a suite of mainstream British right-wing think-tanks—Policy Exchange, IEA and others—since 2017. That is already starting to increase. The amount of money going through DAFs is increasing. Brian Mittendorf, an academic at Ohio State University, has done a really good study looking at the increase in DAFs in America and how they are linked to the increase in extremism and extremist funding. We have already seen this kind of influence. You have seen Americans also funding other think-tanks in Britain, such as climate change deniers. They are also growing. The Heartland Institute, which actually came out of big tobacco, is now a big climate-sceptic think-tank. It now has an office in the UK headed by a regular from GB News, who was obviously at the Reform conference and who says that she was the reason why Nigel Farage is now anti-net zero.

You get a lot of bang for a little bit of buck, and this is something that people are going to be looking at. At the same time, we have a television station—GB News—which is partly owned by a New Zealand hedge funder, who lives in Dubai and runs it through a British Virgin Islands-registered company. Again, that is a clear example of foreign influence in our politics.



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We have been very slow to look at this issue beyond things like Russia or China and start thinking that it is not just about direct cash transfers, it is also about narrative framing. It is about setting up these alliances of people, and it is about repeating these messages around the world, because that is really effective. That is partly how this Christian right and radical right have grown.

Chair: Before I bring in Rosie, did Sunder or Misbah want to add anything to that? No? I should have said that I have worked with HOPE not hate as well. Most people who have done any work on anti-racism will have come across HOPE not hate at some stage.

Q151 **Rosie Duffield:** It has been a really fascinating conversation. I just want to talk a bit about Christian nationalism. At the recent Unite the Kingdom rally, some protesters were carrying crucifix symbols and crosses. How and why do you as a panel think that the far-right movement is appropriating Christianity? I am just going to say as the Member of Parliament for Canterbury, with its cathedral, it is not a Christianity that I recognise. In Canterbury we have a lot of unaccompanied asylum seeker visitors, and we have far more protesters on the counter side than we do those who are bussed in, often, from the far-right groups. So, it is not everywhere. What is your take on that, please?

Peter Geoghegan: I am very happy to start. It is really interesting to see it starting to emerge in Britain. Christian nationalism has been a very powerful force in the United States over recent decades. In effect, we are talking a lot less about worship. We are talking about this merging of rhetoric around faith but with a nationalist and anti-liberal sentiment. That is really what we are talking about with Christian nationalism.

There was a very interesting investigation in *The New York Times* recently, which you might have seen, into an organisation called the Alliance Defending Freedom. You might not have heard of the ADF, but it has funded a lot of legal cases in the UK, especially around the silent protesters outside abortion clinics which have garnered a lot of media attention. The ADF has backed a lot of those cases. But also, as *The New York Times* was able to show, it has been meeting a lot with Reform. There have been secret meetings between the ADF and Reform. The ADF is very plugged in to the Donald Trump White House. These are people who are very much on the inside track. They were massively influential in the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*.

We are starting to see a framing of British politics becoming very cosy with Christian nationalism. I mentioned earlier Liz Truss speaking at Liberty University, which is Jerry Falwell's university in the United States. That has been the cradle of Christian nationalism in the States. That has been very much the cradle of this sort of worldview. It is connected with people like Viktor Orbán in Hungary as well.

We are starting to see it on the fringes as well from talking to sources in America; I talk to a lot of Christians in America. It is a very interesting



area that we have been very slow to pick up on in Britain. We think of ourselves as a very secular country. The role of faith and potentially the role of Christian nationalism in our politics has been very underplayed for a long time. From talking to sources in America in the Christian movement, they are saying to me, "We are seeing more and more connections between the US and the UK."

There are places like the National Conservatism Conference, which is a very big conference, where this year we saw people such as James Orr who is running the Centre for a Better Britain, which is the think-tank linked to Reform. The Centre for a Better Britain has explicitly talked about wanting to emulate the Heritage Foundation. The Heritage Foundation is the organisation behind Project 2025 in America for Donald Trump. Again, there are big Christian nationalist players in America who are very interested in what happens next in Britain.

Britain is also very important in terms of spreading this kind of Christian nationalist message. It is English-speaking, a place in which there is a lot of interest in America, and our parliamentary system is much more like America's. If you think of the influence that you saw with the German election with Elon Musk and the AfD, that is going to be nothing compared to what you are going to see from groups like this when it comes to a British general election.

Q152 Rosie Duffield: Just going back to Canterbury again—sorry, not wanting to make it all about that—we have had this art installation project, and it really stunned me that JD Vance was tweeting about something happening in my cathedral. I was thinking, "Really?" He had a clear view on that and it not being Christian or something. I just thought that was a really weird thing to do, but I guess if he is trying to influence British politics, it makes sense for him to start doing that now, maybe.

Peter Geoghegan: The person I mentioned, James Orr, who runs the Centre for a Better Britain is described as JD Vance's sherpa. They are very good friends. They met in the Cotswolds during the summer. JD Vance is very clearly close to this political project. It is organised, and we have been very slow to see that this is organised. These are people who have genuine connections with each other. They believe in what they believe in; it is really important to say that. When it comes to money, it is not that money makes these people do things they do not believe in but money facilitates all these other networks. The National Conservatism Conference, the Alliance for Responsible Citizenship, and all this language around Judeo-Christianity is also starting to be heard in our politics. These are very much imports from America and have been very successful.

There is a great book I read recently by Tim Alberta called "The Kingdom, the Power and the Glory." It is all about the rise of Christian nationalism in America. His father was an evangelical pastor, so he is very well-placed to discuss this topic. What is really striking is that the America that we know now was not always like this. In the 1970s, the Southern



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Baptist Convention welcomed the decision in *Roe v. Wade*. The fissuring of American politics around religion has been achieved by a very small number of people with very strong intentions and with money behind them.

It is worth remembering that this Christian nationalist movement has huge amounts of money. I spoke to an American recently in this Christian nationalism space, who was talking to me about Britain. He said, "If you look at the boards of, say, some of the big churches in Texas, these organisations, in their congregations are people with billions in their pockets." These are people who are now attending the same events as Liz Truss. Do you think these people do not talk to each other?

Sunder Katwala: It is interesting. This has happened at a time when in the last census, nominal Christianity has fallen below 50% for the first time in our country. Actually, the nominal identification is falling. That will explain the mobilisation. People of different faiths having the coalition talks are a majority of the society, and obviously, no faith has grown. Part of this is about the optics of the United Kingdom, some is about good behaviour: leave the beer cans at home, let us behave well and show that we are not far right and we are not the football lads, today we will be the Christians and so on. There is a challenge then to Christian institutions. As with people who are Muslim or Hindu, different people will use and abuse their faiths. They have to be clear about that.

Another part of it is a very secular Christian narrative for people who do not like Muslims, do not like diversity, and would not be seen near a church but would like to talk about the Easter cards, or Easter eggs or whatever it is, or the abolition of Christmas lights and so on. In some ways, it is leaning into possible cultural conflicts between, for example, the clergy and the worshippers in the Church of England, because one group is older and might have voted for Brexit. That is a useful thing because they are people you can engage with about what it is doing. Where people are using the language of a Christian heritage when they have really no religious attachment to it, it is harder, but it is worth just unpicking what it is doing.

This national conservative project has two different versions, one of which will be hard to sell in Britain, which is the turn-the-whole-clock-back idea: can we have pre-*Roe v. Wade* back? Can we re-criminalise gay people? We want to reverse the last 50 years. That will struggle in Britain a lot. The version that says, "People of the majority group in general, Christians in particular, don't get respect in our society anymore because you only listen to minorities and you don't listen to us. So we accept the changes of the past, but we have a voice too." That is quite resonant. There, you have to put the kettle on and talk to people who are Christian about what it feels like to be Christian in a very secular society that is also a multi-faith society.



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It is a challenge to which the Churches and other people can respond, about how they legitimise the version of their faith that they should be proud to display in society and take away the people who are misusing it.

Q153 Rosie Duffield: I am guessing it is growing in the UK as well. Is this very much on the radar of HOPE not hate? I know you have done lots of investigations with places like Sky News, and it is looking into it. Is that something that you guys are concentrating on at the moment?

Misbah Malik: Yes, definitely. It is important to remember that Christian nationalism—it is important to make a distinction that the majority of the time this is a cultural Christianity, rather than an actual genuine religious Christianity—has since the beginning of time been part of the British far right. There has been crusader imagery, and that Christian nationalism has been used to create an identity that is in opposition to Islam. Again, it is really important to remember that it is a cultural Christianity and it is being used purely to differentiate between the ingroup versus the outgroup. Let us say, for example, that there was a law that meant that all people seeking asylum who were going to be brought to this country were Christians. That would not be the fix or solution. People would still have an issue with that. It is very much white cultural Christianity. It is definitely on our radar.

Going back to what you were saying about the rise of American evangelical influences in the UK, there is definitely a correlation there. It is something that really is quite worrying. Again, echoing what Sunder said about how it is really difficult when it is a cultural Christianity to actually get around that, but it is basically just being used as a way to define the ingroup versus the outgroup. The really worrying thing is that it links back to what used to be on the extreme fringes of the far right, which was this idea that civil war between these two groups was inevitable. This is now a much more mainstream idea that people genuinely believe. We saw it around the riots last year; there was really an uptick in people believing that. Again this summer, those narratives are still perpetuating.

When you have this idea of Christian nationalism and cultural Christianity, that massively feeds into this idea that there is an inherent incompatibility between two groups of people. We are seeing this civil war narrative perpetuating and becoming a lot more mainstream. Yes, it is definitely something we are keeping an eye on.

Chair: Because you mentioned it, Peter, we invited Policy Exchange. It was actually really keen to come. It would have been really helpful if it had come because I am very keen to be able to hear some arguments and, as you say, Sunder, put the kettle on. You could not get more British than that, could you? Put the kettle on. Every difficult conversation, we will put the kettle on. But yes, we are going to engage with it, and it is going to answer some questions that the Committee has. It is important to note that we will be doing that. Now we are coming to far-right funding. Alex?



Q154 **Alex Brewer:** Just before we do that, can I just ask a follow-up on the Christian nationalism? Misbah, would you say that this is adding a veneer of morality to arguments that are sometimes illegal in terms of racial abuse and so on but are considered unacceptable by a lot of people? Is that something that is helpful to the far right in aligning itself with the idea of Christianity?

Misbah Malik: Absolutely. Again, this idea of cultural Christianity in which you do not even have to be religious or ever go to church to be involved in this group, as well as normalising and providing legitimacy to those ideas, is creating a very broad church—pardon the pun—of people who can identify in this way and a very broad set of ideas that people can be brought into. Again, it is a massive co-option of the religion of Christianity. A lot of the time, the things they are calling for are actually not Christian by any stretch of the imagination, but because it has been factored as a cultural Christianity, there is a way to bend those laws and those norms. This means that more and more people can identify with it, and more and more people can be brought into it.

Sunder Katwala: Can I add something to that? In some ways, it is a strategic and tactical mistake as well because it narrows them. It helps them with their US influences, money and so on. But for example, people of minority faiths in this country are quite in favour of an established church, and an established church of the kind that we have that acts as an honest broker for multi-faith dialogue and so on. When you go for the full-on version of this cultural Christianity, you are losing all that.

If you take the speakers at the Unite the Kingdom rally, they were clearly extreme speakers, not just Elon Musk about violence, but about a holy war: no mosques, no synagogues, no gurdwaras. You are slightly losing the thing that will probably have some resonance as people of faith who are Christian think you should have respect for faiths and so on. To some extent, it is a slightly weird tactical thing for them to be doing at this moment, and they are probably doing it for the US reasons.

Q155 **Alex Brewer:** Moving to far-right funding, Peter, I know you have touched on this already, and so I do not want to go over that ground. Who or what is funding the far right at the moment? What do we know about the nature and scale of the funding?

Peter Geoghegan: In some ways this is rehashing everything before, but you are talking about lots of different ways in which money flows through. The internet is part of it; it is the algorithmic part of it. Social media can provide one strand of your funding. It has become easier and easier to put money anonymously into British politics. There are routes in which you can fund. You can fund basically made-up think-tanks because there is very little accountability. Charities do not have to declare where their funds come from; they do not declare who gave them money. There are lots of ways in which money can be brought into the political system that you just cannot see.



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There are also ways in which you can spend money without leaving a trace. Cryptocurrency is one issue that is not a major issue in British politics yet. We are not seeing that much evidence of it, but it could become a big issue. Just this week actually, Spanish police uncovered a really massive—I think it was about €300 million—cryptocurrency fraud with about 3,000 people who have been scammed. The guy at the centre of it had actually given, I think, €115,000 to a far-right Spanish MEP in crypto. At the Joint Committee on the national—

Alex Brewer: We are going to get to crypto in a minute.

Peter Geoghegan: Oh, sorry. I apologise.

Q156 **Alex Brewer:** Could we go to the actual real money?

Peter Geoghegan: Yes. Partly it is actual hard cash, but far more often it is funding networks, funding distribution centres and funding individuals. It could be Tommy Robinson getting £85,000 from Robert Shillman and being made a Shillman fellow. That both funds him but also helps turn him into a citizen journalist. That is really important money. Small amounts of money can make a big difference. Putting money into quasi-astroturf organisations, astroturf think-tanks, astroturf community groups does not often take a huge amount of money and can have a huge impact.

It is also that whole latticework of conferences, the way in which people are able to be brought around the world to different events to meet each other. That all costs money. To go to Europe and meet your fellow MEPs from the far right all takes money. A huge amount of it is funding that infrastructure.

Q157 **Alex Brewer:** You talked about a cap on political donations, and I can see from the answer you have just given how difficult that might be to implement, or how easy it might be to get around. Would it make sense to have a cap on political spending?

Peter Geoghegan: Yes, massively. The other way around this is to cap political spending. Our spending limits in this country are way too high. Among the many egregious things the last Government did around electoral law was raise the spending limits to £35 million during an election campaign. No one got near £35 million in the last general election, so we did not need that. We also badly need spending accountability outside an election year.

At the moment, you have accountability for political spending only in the year of a general election. You can spend as much money as you want outside that, and you cannot see where it has gone or anything. That is a really mad way to do politics especially given the way we live in a 24/7 political world. We were talking about a general election from the day after the last general election. It does not just happen in that lead-up. That is another way in which you would definitely start limiting what you could do with money. If we had spending limits across the whole term of



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a Parliament, that would also start taking some money out of the party political side of it.

Q158 **Alex Brewer:** I might be able to anticipate the answer to this, but to what extent do political finance rules in the UK ensure that the funding of far-right groups is transparent?

Peter Geoghegan: Frankly, the long and short of it is they do not. They ensure very little is transparent.

Q159 **Alex Brewer:** You have mentioned about individuals not being covered by political finance legislation. Does this create challenges in who is being influenced or not, and funded or not?

Peter Geoghegan: Yes, there are huge challenges with this. This is not easy stuff. Part of thinking about things such as a cap on political donations is also signalling that you want to take these issues seriously, that it is something you care about. It is also quite striking that if you want to influence politics, giving money to a political party is often not the way to do it. In my last book, I put Guto Bebb, who was a former Tory Minister, on the record. He said to me that if he had £250,000 and wanted to influence politics—I am paraphrasing here—he would not give it to a political party, he would give it to a think-tank.

This is how you influence the political conversation. We have seen it in this country so much. Ideas bubble up on the fringes of our politics, in the pages of newspapers, online, and in reports that have been written by somebody you have never heard of yet, and are being discussed on the radio, and then they enter our political discourse. This is a real aspect of British politics, but it is not happening just in Britain. This is how American politics has worked for 50 years. This is how the likes of the Koch brothers massively changed the tenor of American politics. Yes, you give money to politicians now and again, but you actually spend way more money on the other stuff because that is way more effective. You want to have the ideas that are being debated, rather than the people who are debating them.

Q160 **Alex Brewer:** Just very quickly, given that a lot of those think-tanks also run polling, is that also problematic?

Peter Geoghegan: I would love to get your view on this, Sunder. There are definitely ways in which polling can be used to set political narratives. We underplay that. I will give just one quick example. I remember ahead of COP26 in Glasgow, there was an opinion poll that came out—it was reported first in *The Telegraph*—that said that a majority of British people wanted a referendum on net zero. At the time, I remember seeing it and thinking, “This is very strange. Where’s this come from?” It was funded by a group called Car26. I wondered what this group is. The company had just been established a couple of weeks earlier, and it had one person attached to it.



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This poll was reported first in *The Telegraph*, then it was on the BBC. There was a discussion on the BBC about it: should we have a referendum on net zero? The person attached to this company was a woman called Lois Perry. Lois Perry went on to briefly become the leader of UKIP and is now the head of the Heartland Institute in the UK that I mentioned earlier. She has claimed credit for changing Nigel Farage's position on net zero which has helped pull the entire conversation on net zero incredibly far.

I am not saying that one poll did that, but that poll probably would have cost less than £1,000. That is an incredible way to narrative-seed. You do not change narratives overnight; it takes time. Although if you spend money in this way, you can have a huge impact. Again, the Heartland Institute is a US organisation that has taken money from Exxon Mobil and big tobacco and is very anti-climate change. It is now operating in the UK too; it has an office somewhere in London.

Sunder Katwala: The risk here is that you are chasing something that you cannot quite get your hands around, especially thinking about the post-organisational far-right. It is not like people are pouring a lot of money into the BNP; it would not be a particularly useful vehicle for what you are trying to do. You can cap your election spending, and you can cap it out of years, which is the stuff that is partisan. Once you then start thinking, who is trying to influence our society? Who owns newspapers? Obviously, we are not talking about the far right; we are just talking about the culture of ideas. I would go completely to the other end of the point.

Of course, if there is a subject that people do not think a lot about, such as the European convention on human rights, then I can ask this question and that question and get the opposite results. There is a "Yes, Minister" sketch that goes through that. We have had quite an anecdotal debate about whether cohesion is getting better or getting worse. We actually have lots of high-quality evidence in this country on British social attitudes and those kinds of things. We do not have high-quality evidence—or often any evidence at all—on the relationships between different groups, or the attitudes of minority groups as well as majority groups.

We know a lot about how people with degrees and those without degrees voted after Brexit. But if you were to say, "What do we know about the younger half of the Muslim population and how they have felt about the last two years, and is that different in the mill towns to London?" You would just have to guess and ask people you thought would know. The answer is actually to invest in high-quality knowledge and research on what people think and why they think it to spot the red flags. It might turn out that Jewish people are feeling very under pressure, and young Muslims are feeling very unheard, and white older conservative people are feeling very unheard, all at the same time. That will definitely be true. Then we work out what to do about it, rather than trying to stop



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people spending money spinning things at the newspapers, which obviously will always go on.

Chair: Before we move on, I just wanted to plug that there was a new report that came out yesterday, the “Muslim Youth Futures” report, which was done by Goldsmiths. It took into account a large number of young Muslim voices and their experience over the last two years. I will hand over to Kevin to talk about crypto.

Q161 **Kevin McKenna:** Like many of my colleagues, I just want to flag that I have done work with HOPE not hate. Also, I am slightly wary that I am now about to potentially unleash Peter’s inner tech geek. Misbah and Sunder, make sure you get a chance to chip in as well. Peter, unleashing you now, what is the role of cryptocurrency in funding far-right groups?

Peter Geoghegan: There are two ways to look at it. If you think of funding extremism in general, in the US there is some interesting analysis that came out from an organisation called Chainalysis, which reckons about \$20 million in crypto had gone to what they would class as extremist organisations in the US. In Europe it is much less. We do not have the same culture of it, but it is on the rise in Europe too. We will not go down the keyhole of Donald Trump’s crypto gigs, but the fact that the President of the United States is pushing crypto so aggressively means it is a place where you are seeing more and more funding going through.

In the UK we accept political donations in crypto. We have seen some evidence of it only on the far right: a small amount of money went to the Homeland Party, another to Patriotic Alliance. Reform has said it has had two donations of crypto, but it has not said how much they are for yet. The big problem that we have is crypto markets being incredibly transparent. I gave evidence to the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy a couple of months ago, and we had a representative from the crypto industry who talked about transparency. On one level the transparency is true, but on the other it is increasingly easy to use things called mixers, where effectively you can put crypto wallets together, and you can mix where the money has come from. There is a reason why drug dealers love crypto; it is not because it is wonderfully transparent. On one level, it should be super transparent; the ledger is there, the blockchain is there, but actually you can mix a lot of this up.

When it comes to political funding, it is not a big issue in Britain at the moment. We are not seeing huge amounts of donations in crypto, but we might in the future. The real problem at the moment is we have a place where the Electoral Commission is treating cryptocurrency the same as fiat currency donations. But the head of the Electoral Commission has also said, these were his words, “Very hard” to actually analyse where the crypto has come from, and it is particularly open to foreign interference and foreign money. We do not have a regulatory set-up at the moment that is in any way set to deal with that. There is not the expertise in the Electoral Commission or the know-how, and frankly, the



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crypto world is moving faster than regulators are able to keep up with. That is the big concern.

Outside of party politics, we are definitely seeing that the role of crypto in money transfers on the right is very big. That is definitely a real thing, both across borders and within borders. The Unite the Kingdom rally actually had a crypto sponsor. There is a huge connection as well. That whole network of brologarchs, the crypto industry and the radical right are very much together. Their views of the world are very similar. These are fellow travellers, so in some respects it is not a surprise. But particularly for actual party political donations, we should be very wary of crypto. It is quite a dangerous position at the moment to have an Electoral Commission saying, "It's very hard to keep track of this, it's very hard for us to know where it comes from, but we are also going to accept it."

Q162 **Kevin McKenna:** You have done a very good job of explaining what the problems are with it as well, which was my next follow-on. That is really good. In that case, what on earth are we going to do about it?

Peter Geoghegan: There are things we could do if we invested in it. You could have crypto going into political parties only from regulated UK crypto providers, where there are KYC—know your customer—checks. There is a way of creating a regulatory framework around it, but what you would have to do is pause any donations until that framework is in place. Also, given how straight the Electoral Commission is, there is also a question of whether this is something we are going to say, "Look, we're not going to do this at the moment because we're not able to do it"? That is my concern.

There is just a real danger in saying, "We're actually going to accept something that at the moment we can't do, or we're not able to deal with it." It is not a surprise. Again, when it comes to the next general election, part of our rules and part of our problems in our electoral system is that donations that come in a general election year but are not in the short campaign often will not come out in the donation data until after the election. It is not hard to see a crypto donation being made, and by the time the Electoral Commission has figured out where it has come from, the election has been and gone.

Nigel Farage actually announced that Reform was taking crypto donations at a crypto conference in America, I think it was in Las Vegas. Again, if you are looking for American interest and American influence, crypto is a space in which these people are easily moving money around. It contributes to this. At the moment, it is not a huge on-the-ground problem, but we are storing up a problem because we know it is there, and we are not dealing with it.

Q163 **Kevin McKenna:** Misbah and Sunder, do you have any thoughts on that as well as to what we should do?

Misbah Malik: Nothing. Peter is the expert.



Q164 **Kevin McKenna:** That is absolutely fine. In that case, just from that whole discussion around political funding, crypto or otherwise, it got into how there is a lot of hidden money and a lot of hidden discourse that is being used to fund think-tanks. That is fine because if we could follow that, we could trace that through. How do we draw the line between someone who is funded in quite a hidden, cryptic and occult way and people who are just spontaneously writing blog posts, spontaneously writing things online, and spontaneously putting things on Twitter or Bluesky or anywhere like that? How do we get that line determined?

Peter Geoghegan: Transparency around funding is the key to it all, really. It is a sunlight question. At the moment what you are seeing, and what we have in Britain, is that we are not talking about money in brown envelopes really. That is not the kind of influence campaign we are talking about. We are talking about networks, infrastructure, and narratives. The role of money in driving that is real, but at the moment we have so little transparency in so many places, for example, from charities. The definition of charities is so capacious, but at the same time charities do not have to declare where money comes from. Money can get into political parties, and frankly, our donation limits are way too high in terms of declarations. The last Government's change in that was far too high. We now have ceilings that are way too high, which will allow you to influence politics without donations ever having been declared. Crypto will make that easier too.

If we just start embedding actual basic transparency into these places, then if somebody is writing a blog post, they can do that. I do not know what Sunder's view on this is, but it is quite important we do not end up in the censoring speech place. It is not about going, "You can't say that." It is not even saying, "You can't say that if you have this money," but there is a reason people like to hide money. It is because their message will be damaged by where their funding is coming from, and they know that. It is because it is so important to be able to masquerade in some respects as being completely out of the fray, not having any interests.

That is why it is so important to bring transparency into the political system, so you can see, have that sunlight, and you can say, "Actually, I can now see where this is going on." Then it can become a question that people have to answer. It is perfectly reasonable in a democratic society, that you then have to answer those questions.

Sunder Katwala: In one way, you can do what you can on showing that this is the supply, the funding and the resourcing of this kind of thing. You can limit it where it is very directly in electoral politics, and you can make it transparent and so on. Then if we are thinking about community cohesion and what community cohesion is, where do we invest our resource, energy and capacity into the demand and appetite for this kind of stuff in our society? That is what our resilience would come from.

In some ways, community cohesion is about the views and values of young people, older people, citizens, when they are in receipt of people



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who want to spend a lot of money persuading them of these things. To some extent, cohesion is going to have to be about that: the population's view of the kind of stuff that is being foisted upon them.

Chair: Just to give you a little idea of where we are in terms of timing, if you are happy to stay for a little longer that would be really great. This has been absolutely fascinating, and we have a few more areas to go over. I am going to hand over to Christine now about immigration, and then I am going to come to Kim on integration and cohesion, then I will come to Nadia. Okay?

Q165 **Christine Jardine:** In the interest of transparency—funnily enough—I used to be a journalist. Peter, you probably do not remember this, but you and I worked together when I was at Strathclyde University teaching journalism, and at the BBC.

Peter Geoghegan: I remember this, Christine. How could I forget?

Christine Jardine: Oh, dear. That has put me off now. Sorry, thank you very much. Let us move to immigration, which is, if you like, one of the impacts of all this money coming in and influencing what we think. Sunder, if I could ask you first, how would you outline the public's attitude to immigration?

Sunder Katwala: Public attitudes to immigration are mixed, and different people think different things. It is more polarised now than it was three years ago. Something I would have been saying, More in Common would have been saying, and HOPE not hate would have been saying in different ways, is that most people are balancers on immigration and some people are not. There is a difference between the real world and the online world because you will not find many balancers talking about immigration from either side online. But there have been some changes in the long run.

Immigration is lots of different things at once. One thing that has happened since the Government changed, as we will hear in a couple of weeks' time, is that net migration has fallen by about 400,000, for example. It has probably fallen by about two thirds from its peak level. Asylum claims have continued to go up. The public are pretty clear they think immigration is going up, not down. That tells us that the visible feeling of control of asylum, which used to be 4% of immigration—it is probably about an eighth of immigration now—is driving much of this discussion that we are calling immigration more than the levels of immigration.

Q166 **Christine Jardine:** Are there any other push factors in immigration that are pushing towards this demand for lower immigration?

Sunder Katwala: For example, should immigration be higher or lower? Across time, two thirds of people were saying it should be lower when there was net zero immigration, and so on. These days that is much more divided than it was, where if you are a graduate who votes for the Liberal



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Democrats, the Labour party or the Scottish National party, you would say, "I think I'm sort of okay with it," because you are reacting a bit to not being in team Nigel Farage or team Brexit and so on. If you are on the right, you are more likely saying, "Well, I really want it down a lot."

When we then test what people would cut and reduce, about a quarter or a third of people can identify some immigration they would reduce that is not asylum. For example, some people would reduce the number of students. Most people would not. The most popular category to reduce is bankers because the left voters join in and say, "I don't know if we want any bankers," and eventually people would say, "We'll let the bankers in if they pay their taxes." But they are keener to reduce bankers than they are care workers, or fruit pickers and so on.

On the whole, in the middle people are wanting control, selection, contribution and so on, but some people on the right—certainly most of the Reform voters and more of the conservative voters—also think that control is reduction. That has become more polarised, as has the question of refugees, asylum and so on. Two thirds of people in our country would still admit refugees in a controlled way, but it is a much more polarised debate if it is about boats.

Q167 Christine Jardine: That feeling that you are describing, the frustration, the riots, the protests we have seen recently, to what extent do you think that is the result of public dissatisfaction with Governments? Do they feel that successive Governments have failed?

Sunder Katwala: There is very low trust in Governments on immigration. There is probably a latent consensus as to what a sensible view of it is. One thing I would say is that Governments could actually trust the public more. If you involved the middle of the public, not just the people at the different ends of it, then most people think, "When it's very high it's hard to build the houses, but I don't want to turn down the stuff that's good for the NHS and the universities." You would actually get the thing that the politicians are trying to get.

They have slogans on how low could it be. This summer, we practically had an auction on how many people we could deport, which was well beyond where the voters of the Reform party or the Conservative party—never mind the other voters—are on this. The public would respond quite well to a debate about control that made them engage with the dilemmas of control, because they believe there are dilemmas of control. They are for specific bits of immigration, but they worry about it being high and fast.

Q168 Christine Jardine: Maybe I am misinterpreting what you are saying: you are saying that there is a concern, but there is also a recognition that we need certain types of immigration. But to some extent this battle, this auction between the political parties to come up with the right message, is driving the debate rather than reacting to it or just reflecting it?



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Sunder Katwala: For example, the principles in the White Paper, which are that we should have control; we have control; we welcome contribution; we look at what it does; we should promote cohesion and citizenship; and we should debate how they do it. Broadly speaking, they would meet this point. But if any Government are just saying, "It should be lower, it should be lower, it should be lower, it should be lower, and so on," there is always a debate about it. It would be much better to have something that looked a bit like a budget, where you say how much you are spending, how much is tax, and how we will do it.

If you had a debate about immigration, you could say, "If you want it to be low, we'll cut this, but if we're keeping it high, we'll keep it here but spend the money in this way." It would better to have a rational debate about the choices we are making and the consequences, not just a set of slogans about net zero, net negative, net 100, that are not connected. For example, we had a target, a slogan and a manifesto in the last Government for many years, but there was no process that checked what decisions were being made to do that. Actually, we had a Government that liberalised immigration a lot—with good reasons about Hong Kong and Ukrainians and good reasons about students and so on—but they did not ask the Parliament or the public to think about how to make the choices add up.

Q169 **Christine Jardine:** Would I be right in saying that if we were to hypothecate what the results of each immigration policy would be, in the same way as we do with taxes, that might have more of an impact with the public?

Sunder Katwala: We need the visibility of voice in how all the choices are made. The BBC does a good job. The BBC's immigration review said that one of the reasons people think most immigration is asylum is because that is politically contested, that is always on the news. The BBC, ITV and others should do more to explain the different mixes. They do a very good job on the two days a year when the figures come out and they show you what it is, but they do not do a good job the rest of the time.

The relatively uncontroversial bits of immigration—we can still debate student visas, post-student visas, care home visas and so on—they just do not get discussed as much, and so people think it is all there. If I was the Government, I would try to just be much more transparent about the choices that were there. About a quarter of the public will not be very interested in that debate and will have loud things to say and will say, "We never talk about it enough." There is a bit of the public that is insatiable on it because this is a different value, but you can engage the people you can engage, and most people are people you can engage on this.

Q170 **Christine Jardine:** Estimates suggest that immigration levels in the UK have actually fallen. Do you believe public attitudes towards immigration will soften because of the response to that?



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Sunder Katwala: Public attitudes are not going to change because of the real numbers because people are unaware of the number. One of the points there will be if asylum is visibly there all the time in hotels, you have to get some control of that for people to be knowledgeable about it, and you should rebalance the conversation about what people hear about.

Misbah Malik: Yes, I completely agree. Attitudes are not going to change in relation to numbers. There is a massive question about how we actually lower the salience of asylum as an issue that the public are rallying around. Also, anti-immigration rhetoric in particular is obviously a big part of this but just to go back to what I was saying before, if we are focusing on these attitudes as only an immigration issue, we are massively behind the curve. What we have seen over the last couple of years—in particular, when we look at the far right and the narratives that are happening there—is this is not just about immigration and people coming in, this is about multiculturalism more broadly. This is about people who were born here and lived here their entire lives. We have seen the march for remigration, we have seen calls for people who have literally grown up here their entire lives to be deported, which is just absolutely insane.

Obviously, asylum is a big part of it. But I worry that if we are seeing the way that the Overton window is being shifted, and if we are seeing the way that the blurring between the mainstream and the far right is becoming more and more porous, it is not going to be very long until that remigration narrative and the calls for people to be sent back to where their grandparents were born are going to become more and more mainstream. It is more than just immigration, it is more than just boats, it is more than just people coming in. We have to defend the multicultural British identity, otherwise the far right is just going to massively exploit it, run with it and own that narrative.

There is definitely a wariness, an uneasiness and an anxiety to talk about British identity from those people in the moderate middle who are the majority because it has been so weaponised by the far right. But we are basically allowing it to set the terms of what it means to be British and what that identity actually looks like. If we do not claim that back, we have completely lost it. We are definitely going in that direction already, which is really, really worrying, but there are ways to bring it back.

We need to showcase hyper-local examples of where multiculturalism has really worked. One of the best things about my job is that I oversee our communities work, and so every day I am seeing really great, happy and hopeful stories about people at the local level coming together and seeing where cohesion and integration—whatever you want to call it—really work. There is a massive part of this that is about amplifying those local stories, which are not newsworthy and are not clickbaity because they are not perpetuating hate, essentially. But those are the stories that are



going to get us out of this issue that we have found ourselves in. We really need to highlight those as well.

Q171 **Christine Jardine:** Why do you think the small boat crossings get so much attention when they are a small percentage of overall immigration? Why is that a thing that we are focusing on?

Misbah Malik: A big part of it is the imagery of it, especially when we think about the narratives about storming the White Cliffs of Dover, and so on. It is very visual. It is the same reason why asylum hotels have been a massive part of the anti-immigration rhetoric: it makes a great visual that really translates well over social media, pictures, YouTube, and so on. Again, that is why one of the things that really needs to happen is that the salience of this is lowered.

Sunder Katwala: Our research would suggest we should encourage people with liberal views not to say, "Oh, it's a distraction and we should talk about other things." Actually, that visible lack of control has cultural imagery about the sea, the docks, and being an island and so on. We should say that control and compassion can work if you co-operate with other countries that are in favour of doing their bit. We have a workable version of how we can make this work, and other people have a proposal that we should rip up all the treaties and obligations and try to not do it.

If you think about what has not worked in the last six years, and example is passing laws that say, "Nobody who comes will be able to claim," and people coming anyway; that is why hotels were full of people whose claims were not being processed after a backlog. In a way, you could go for the uber, ultra-tough version of that one day, but then people would have to give up the value of being part of an international protection system. In a way, I would be careful not to dismiss the importance of the issue that Governments can control asylum but you need to have promises you can keep, not promises you cannot keep.

Q172 **Kim Leadbeater:** This has been so interesting and really helpful, so thank you very much. I am going to come back to the point that you finished on, Misbah, when you last spoke around cohesion and integration at a community level and what we can do about that, but also what policy things we can change and put in place. You also said that issues are not being addressed through a policy lens. For me, the change has to come from a top-down and a bottom-up approach, and that is where things will change.

I did five years working at a community level, doing similar work to what some of you do, around how we bring people together and find common ground. It is also very important that we celebrate all the positive things that are happening, without pretending that everything is perfect because we know it is not. What do you think that should look like at a grassroots level and at a community level? What do you think things should look like from a government, policy and political level, as to how we celebrate the positive things that are happening in our communities but also address



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the challenges that we know there are, a lot of which we have talked about today?

Misbah Malik: That is a broad question, and it is a really important one. The first thing I just want to flag is that, obviously, this is about community cohesion. A big part of that is about social connection and bridging gaps, and so on, but at HOPE not hate we like to think about it more broadly. We call it community resilience, and you can call it whatever you want, but essentially we are talking about how the problem with cohesion is not just about social connection and how people feel about each other, it is also about access to resources. Scarcity narratives and this idea of competition for resources are a huge part of why people feel the way they do at the moment, as well as agency and empowerment.

This sense of disenfranchisement and feeling as though people do not have control over their lives was mentioned by others before. That is something that is being massively weaponised by the far right at the moment. Farage classing himself as the solution to the anti-Westminster elite issues we are having at the moment is a huge one. This cannot just be about bringing people around, putting the kettle on and chatting. Obviously, that is really important but it has to go much broader than that.

At the grassroots level, like I said, this work is already being done. We have great community power initiatives going ahead, we have great grassroots organisations that are filling gaps in what people in their community need. My solution there would be for Government to basically just fund and allow these groups to continue doing what they are doing. Again, one of the things we hear quite often from grassroots organisations is a lot of the time they feel like they are just a drop in the ocean. They are doing what they do, and they are doing what they do best because they care for their community and they understand the nuances. But without an overarching framework and guidance, and essentially an aim, a goal and a direction that we all want to get to, people feel incredibly demoralised and often feel as though they are not making any difference, which just is not the case.

We want to make sure that all these great initiatives that are happening are all pulling in the same direction and that we all have the same broad vision of what we want our country to look like. Again, as you mentioned Kim, a big part of that is making sure we are drawing attention to all those great stories so people do not feel so alone and do not feel as though their little community café is not really doing anything because that is not the case at all. A big part of that is about the power of local news and local press and how we can amplify that to a national level; that is a big thing.

But also just from a government perspective, in terms of setting the narrative. I mentioned before about how Britishness and British identity have been massively co-opted by the far right, and they are the ones



setting the terms of how we talk about it and how we talk about immigration. A lot of the time it is mainstream figures in the middle and in the majority who are chasing those narratives and chasing that rhetoric. That is never going to amount to anything. We almost need to completely break away from what the far right is telling us about our country and communities, and set the terms of how we want to be as a country and as a society.

Yes, essentially at HOPE not hate we think top-down guidance and, crucially, funding to support localised implementation is really, really important. The Pride in Place programme of work that has just been announced is such a good opportunity to really spearhead this work. As long as it comes alongside genuine commitments for power sharing and for local people to genuinely shape what they want in their community, there is a lot of potential there. Things like that. The more we have programmes of work that address those things in that way, the more we are heading in the right direction.

Q173 Kim Leadbeater: One thing I am trying to push the Government to do—because we have not done enough on it yet in my view—is something around loneliness and isolation. We need to have a loneliness strategy, which there has been over the last few years but there is not much going on at the moment by the looks of it; we need something like that to bring people together. It is sitting down and having a cup of tea, but I also agree there is a much deeper level of work that needs to be done. You cannot undervalue that social connection that we can create for people.

Sunder Katwala: I agree with a lot of the analysis. Something important is missing at the national level, and the way in which it is missing is important at the national and local level in different ways. It is both the framework and the vision. In terms of the vision of what a cohesive society is and where we are trying to get to and so on, it would be too little to say, “Not having riots in a particular summer.” But it would also be too much to say that in a democracy we need to agree on the immigration level, or the taxation level, or the level of spending. It is about the limits of where some debates go and take us. We do not have the narrative and the framework.

In a moment like this, a lot of people want to do more, and they are not sure what to do about it. There is a risk that we are too reactive in these very fast and volatile times. Of course, in terms of stopping the far right, if there is a political party doing well that you do not like and you are getting other people to vote for someone else, that is fine, but we need the overall sense of, what is it we are trying to do? A cohesive society is a glue that connects us. It is partly fair chances and individual opportunity—we measure a lot of that—and it is partly the relationships between different people: how do people feel towards my group? Does it have respect? Does it not have respect? What do I share with people? Do I have a shared identity? Some of that will be on the individual level as



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well: am I completely disconnected from my neighbours or from people on the other side?

We also think about bonding and bridging. Bonding is good for individuals, but in a society in which lots of people bond on this side of town and not that side of town, you need bonding and bridging. You need a balance. There is no real framework of what we are trying to achieve there. If you had that, you would then be able to say to the people who want you to turn up at the local level, "What bit can you do?" Because the Government risk saying, "Local communities, you know best. Good luck, and let us know. Tell us how you're getting on." Of course, local communities know best about how to spend money on the high street to make it look good, but they do not particularly know best about what it is like to be at the epicentre of a global crisis that is related to a conflict in India and Kashmir, or the Middle East, or to something Elon Musk has done. Of course they do not have that. We have actually made quite a lot of progress in the long term in this society, across generations because schools have done good work and because in more diverse areas people have had good contact over time and got to know each other.

The confidence is higher in areas of high diversity and in areas of high migration, not when it is really fast, and so on. It is unevenly spread. It is unevenly spread up the age groups, it is unevenly spread across the geography. While you should stretch all the contact as far as it can go at a local level, there is something missing if you do only that, which is that a lot of our problems are coming from people in receipt of a set of messages online, and so on, and they are not really going to have the local contact and turnout. We have to think quite hard about their feelings of fear, anxiety, and threat about other people they share their society with and how to do that. It might be that hearing about the way in which remembrance is shared across groups calms somebody down. It does not mean that they are going to be massively in favour of an outgroup but that they know that something they feared was not there.

The Government do not really have that voice, that strategy, that plan in place. While that is the case, if something happens, if there is a terrible incident at a synagogue in Manchester, then they will do more on antisemitism. If somebody attacks a mosque in Sussex, they will do more. Then they might put the building blocks in place—we define one thing, now let us define another thing—but what we do not have is the overall picture. If you had the overall picture, you could say, "What can the faith groups do?" And of course, the faith groups are good with the people who want to turn up to interfaith dialogue, but they are not great with the people who do not. What can the schools do? What can the schools in tougher areas do? The football trust or the rugby league trust will have a bit of reach that the universities and the chambers of commerce do not have.

But until you have the map of what we are all trying to do, then you do not really have the chance to parcel out the jobs. Then if we are talking



about conflict resolution of people who are very angry and very hateful, we actually need to invest in the people who we want to do the really sharp stuff because it will not go very well if they just turn up and try to do it; they actually need some support and advice. That map of what we are trying to achieve is not there yet, and we need to talk about a realistic way to put it in place.

Chair: I am conscious of the fact we have just been told we are going to have votes before 5 pm, so Nadia?

Q174 **Nadia Whittome:** I will be as quick as possible. My first questions are to Misbah and secondly, to Sunder. You are off the hook, Peter. Misbah, what impact do you think rhetoric from politicians and public figures has had on the debate on immigration? Has this rhetoric got worse, in your view, in the last year?

Misbah Malik: Yes, it has had a huge impact. I have mentioned a couple of times before about this idea of the Overton window massively shifting. I have mentioned it before, but it is just really crucial: the fact that remigration narratives are back in somewhat normalised discourse is really, really worrying. Again, the mainstream and the far right have always been a continuum rather than two distinct groups, but it is becoming more and more porous.

It is really important that we remember that the politics of Reform UK that we are seeing today, and the narratives that have underpinned all the violence we have seen over the summer, were normalised in and around the Conservative party. That is a huge part of this. Not just the party itself, which was adopting very radical right policies, but also that broader ecosystem of think-tanks, campaign groups, academics and media outlets. It is a whole radical right ecosystem that has really normalised all this rhetoric.

In terms of what has happened in the last year, I want to draw back to what I said beforehand, when I was talking about this idea of chasing Reform and chasing Reform's narrative. Even if you are not necessarily saying things that are worse than the far right, simply by responding to them you are somewhat giving them a platform. You are normalising them, you are chasing them, you are letting them set the terms of what is acceptable. Particularly in an environment where there is very little trust in mainstream politicians and mainstream political processes. Again, doing that just adds fuel to the fire and further normalises it.

That is why I am so passionate about this idea that we need to stop responding to what the far right is saying. We need to almost drown out those extreme fringes and amplify that moderate middle, and set our own terms of what we want to say about immigration, Britishness and multicultural identity. That was a roundabout way of answering your question. But yes, it has been massively normalised by politicians essentially rolling out the red carpet for Reform to keep saying more and more extreme things, for the far right to keep saying more and more



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extreme things. That is why we need to stop doing that and set the terms of what we want to talk about and how we want to talk about it.

Q175 **Nadia Whittome:** That was a very detailed and succinct answer, thank you. We have spoken about Reform and the Conservatives, do you also have concerns about some rhetoric that the Government have been using? For example, the, “island of strangers” comments.

Misbah Malik: Yes, absolutely. There is a clear want for the Government to chase Reform and move further to the right to try to gain some ground there. Again, that is really worrying in terms of what it normalises. We have seen, for example, an Islamophobia definition and the situation that has gone on there. It is not just what they are saying, it is also what they are not saying. That is particularly worrying when these issues are politicised in a way where it is about public support and the electoral process, rather than actually public attitudes. That is where we get into a really worrying situation.

You are never going to out-Reform Reform on immigration, you are never going to be more extreme than Reform on certain things. That is why I am saying that chasing them really is not going to do anything, and we need to draw back and set the terms ourselves. It goes back to what Sunder was saying: the majority of people are actually fairly level-headed and have fairly balanced views about things, so why are we not reflecting that in the wider political discourse? That is a really important question.

Q176 **Nadia Whittome:** I just have a final question for you. While I remember, I should declare that I have worked with HOPE not hate, like everyone else has, and I was the vice chair of the APPG in the last Parliament. Misbah, how do you believe politicians should speak about integration and immigration? What do you think the parameters of healthy debate are?

Misbah Malik: Again, that is a really good question. Not to keep echoing myself, but the most crucial part of that is that we are not just responding to what the far right is saying, we are setting our own terms. It goes back to what I was saying about how when it comes to cohesion—echoing what Sunder was saying as well—we have no vision and no strategy for what we actually want our country to look like. That is right: are we simply trying to get to a society where there are no riots every single summer, with people living in fear and locking themselves in their houses? Yes, obviously we do not want that, but we do not actually know what we want more than that. We do not actually know what we want to see in terms of how we live cohesively, what that actually looks like in terms of our community.

To answer your question, what do I want to see politicians doing? I want them to start talking about how they want things to be, rather than just condemning what we are seeing at the moment. That is really, really crucial because obviously our name is HOPE not hate, and I feel like a lot of the time a lot of this conversation is focusing on the hate. Obviously,



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that is really, really important, but what is actually the alternative vision? What is the alternative society that we are trying to build? At the moment, I have absolutely no idea what that is from the Government, and what they are actually trying to do. What is that long-term vision?

It comes back to the timescales in which we are trying to operate, but if we are actually thinking long term, what does our multicultural, cohesive British society look like? In terms of what I want to see politicians doing, I want them to see them talking about our communities and our countries in a really positive way. Again, a big part of that is drawing from the local and bringing that up because that is where all the really great stories are. But there has to be a way that cohesively draws together all these really small, hyper-local but very inspirational and powerful stories, to this broader vision of what we actually want to see. Yes, what I want to see is actually a vision, a strategy and a way of getting there, for what our cohesive, multicultural British society looks like.

Q177 Nadia Whittome: That is very useful. Thank you very much, and thank you for the work you do. Sunder, you spoke at the beginning of the session about the ways in which the cost of living crisis, problems with housing and public services are driving this discontent, and how failures in those areas have undermined public trust in politics: I just wanted to ask a couple of questions about that. Do you think there is a risk that future reductions in government spending could further undermine attempts to improve community cohesion?

Sunder Katwala: At two different levels; if you do not invest in community cohesion at all and you are just hoping it turns up, that is one thing, and you are under more pressure because of the resources. In a very segregated society divided by class and economics, it is harder to do cohesion because you do not have the capacity and the resources to connect.

There are dangers for different bits of the centre-left and the left that they can sometimes think that if they change the subject back to dealing with those socioeconomic issues, the cohesion issues will sort themselves out. That is a mistake as well because you need both strategies at once. It is not really the case that if you fix the potholes and improve the health service, that will transform what people think about different ethnic and faith groups that they share society with. You have to work on that directly at the same time.

Q178 Nadia Whittome: We have the Budget in two weeks. What spending decisions do you think would help support community cohesion, and what would undermine it?

Sunder Katwala: I am not sure that this debate is a particular priority for the Government in this particular phase because they feel that what they have done with Pride in Place is quite important. They have not thought about the things that are not Pride in Place, such as resilience



monitoring and so on. The gap in the conversation about what to fund and what to resource is related to the gap in framework and strategy about what we are meant to do and what we are missing. We need a longer-term plan that has some investment in it. We saw some green shoots of that, we have had integration action areas and so on, but we have not had an overall strategy. The risk is that people think Pride in Place is their cohesion strategy, and it is not. It is something else that is good.

Q179 **Nadia Whittome:** How about on some issues we mentioned earlier around cost of living, housing and public services: the second strand of the strategy, as you put it?

Sunder Katwala: What I would say about the relationship between these things is that when times are tough, it is hard to be generous to outgroups. For example, it is particularly hard to make the case for international development spending when times are tough. But whether someone is an outgroup or an ingroup, when we think about whether we should invest in housing, or abolish the two-child limit, and so on, at the other end of town it is about the relationships between people. It is a good thing for reasons of poverty to abolish two-child limits and invest in child poverty, and that will disproportionately benefit larger families from minority backgrounds, for example. That is not a reason not to do it, unless people think it is not. It is important to have this socioeconomic fairness for everybody by place, it is something we do, but also to understand the relationship between whether people feel connected or disconnected from people who are different from them.

Chair: Thank you so much. We could carry on for ages. I just want to say thank you very much for all your expertise, experience and knowledge, and for sharing that with us in a way that we understand, even if I have to Google what a cryptocurrency mixer is. Thank you, I really appreciate it, and I know the rest of the Committee does as well. That brings our session to a close.