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Lord Tony Hall CBE
Director-General, BBC

By email to: TonyHallandPA@bbc.co.uk

10 December 2019

Dear Lord Hall,

This General Election, there has been a distinct lack of proportionate coverage of the widespread and institutional issues of Islamophobia in the Conservative Party, given its scale (see Appendix for details). The failure of the BBC - as a public broadcaster - of being impartial and consistent in its coverage on similar issues, is the basis for this letter.

The Conservative Party has an institutional, widespread problem with Islamophobia, which has been clearly documented both by the Muslim Council of Britain and other individuals, organisations and media outlets. The Conservative Party has consistently failed to address its problem with Islamophobia, with individuals at every level within the party having had accusations of Islamophobia made against them. Regrettably, this includes the Prime Minister, who when challenged about his well-known comments mocking Muslim women during the BBC Question Time Leaders Special, refused to apologise and was not pressed on this issue.

Islamophobia is not just prevalent in political discourse, but also in society and on the streets. Religious hate crime in England and Wales rose by 40% to its highest level in 2017-18, with more than half of all religiously-motivated attacks being directed at Muslims. Islamophobia in our country's governing party, therefore, is of huge concern to British Muslims, and the failure of the BBC to report on this extensively during this election is deeply disappointing and neglects to represent an issue of great importance to society at large.

Not only has the BBC not covered the full extent of Islamophobia in the Conservative Party that many in society feel should be being discussed this election, it has given platform to individuals who have used far-right Islamophobic hate. Melanie Phillips made a false accusation that deception is a mainstream Muslim belief in The Times on 2nd December and was then a guest on Politics Live on 5th December. This was despite Phillips having used her platform on Daily Politics previously to make excuses for Islamophobia. By giving her a platform like any other columnist, the BBC is mainstreaming views that are offensive and unacceptable about Muslims.

The BBC, as a public service broadcaster, has a responsibility to report fairly on issues within all political parties that affect society. Yet, particularly during this General Election, it has not given due prominence to the Conservative Party's systemic problem with Islamophobia. The treatment of Islamophobia in the Conservative Party by the BBC appears to be for the semblance of impartiality rather than with the understanding and belief of the scale of the problem.

Racism against Muslims should be given equal importance to racism against others. The Muslim Council of Britain calls for a full explanation as to the reasoning why racism against Muslims, despite being institutional in the governing party, has not been reported on extensively by the BBC, the implications of this, and how the BBC will ensure all political parties are held to account equally over instances of racism within their ranks.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Harun Rashid Khan', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Harun Rashid Khan
Secretary General

Appendix

During this General Election, there have been five Conservative Party candidates who have had allegations of Islamophobia made against them. This includes:

1. Anjana Patel, Conservative candidate for Brent North. On 18th November, BuzzFeed News reported that Patel had previously tweeted a hateful message to Nobel laureate, Malala Yousafzai, asking what she was doing to stop sex offenders from “your religion”. Patel quietly deleted her Twitter account, but the Conservative Party was aware of this tweet and decided to let her stand anyway.¹
2. Anthony Browne, Conservative candidate for South Cambridgeshire. On 11th November, The Guardian reported that Browne had previously written about Muslims in Britain having “divided loyalties”. Despite facing calls to stand down, Browne has not been suspended and remains the candidate.²
3. Antony Calvert, Conservative candidate for Wakefield. On 9th November, The Independent reported that Calvert had said Colonel Gaddafi should have “fled to Bradford” to go unnoticed. The Conservative Party did not ask him to stand down or take any action, but Calvert voluntarily stood down.³
4. Karl McCartney, Conservative candidate for Lincoln. On 25th November, BBC reported that McCartney had shared several posts from Tommy Robinson, former leader of the English Defence League, and far-right commentator Katie Hopkins which contained Islamophobic and anti-Semitic material. McCartney faced no action from the Conservative Party.⁴
5. Ryan Houghton, Conservative candidate for Aberdeen North. On 19th November, The National covered on the frontpage of its print newspaper Houghton’s suspension over Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and homophobia, but the BBC article on the suspension neglected to mention Houghton’s Islamophobic comments entirely.⁵

Whilst BBC News online reported on Karl McCartney, Ryan Houghton and Antony Calvert, it has still not reported on Anjana Patel or Anthony Browne’s Islamophobic remarks or the calls for them to stand down.

During this election, there have been multiple dossiers released to news outlets including details of Conservative Party members having engaged with Islamophobia. Whilst the dossier leaked to The Guardian was covered by the BBC,⁶ the report released by LBC which included 10 serving and former Conservative councillors making or sharing Islamophobic content on social media⁷ was not mentioned in any BBC reports.

The BBC has also had ample opportunity to question Conservative Party Ministers, including the Prime Minister, on the party’s record of Islamophobia and consistent failure to tackle this. Instances include:

1. Boris Johnson on the Andrew Marr Show on 1st December claimed the Conservative Party refuses “to allow people to get away with prejudice and discrimination”, which is a demonstrably false claim. As highlighted above, there have been candidates in this election

¹ <https://www.buzzfeed.com/alexwickham/conservative-candidate-islamophobic-tweet>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/nov/11/tory-candidate-anthony-browne-faces-calls-quit-over-disgusting-racism>

³ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/tory-candidate-racist-sexist-facebook-posts-wakefield-antony-calvert-mary-creagh-a9196451.html>

⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-2019-50546353>

⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-north-east-orkney-shetland-50468770>

⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-50398826>

⁷ <https://www.lbc.co.uk/news/dossier-showing-10-tory-councillors-islamophobia/>

- alone who have been accused of Islamophobia and have not had any action taken against them. Johnson was not questioned further on this.⁸
2. Boris Johnson on the Question Time Leaders Special on 22nd November was asked to accept and apologise for contributing to race hate. He refused to apologise, and the matter was not held to account on this.⁹
 3. Michael Gove on Radio 4's Today programme on 13th November claimed the Conservative Party would be holding a standalone inquiry into Islamophobia, which had previously been dismissed by the Prime Minister and the party. The BBC did not challenge him on this, and when Conservative Party sources later confirmed that this would not be the case, the BBC did not report on this correction.¹⁰
 4. Robert Buckland on the Andrew Neil Show on 27th November claimed the Conservative Party has "been taking swift and immediate action" on complaints of Islamophobia, despite there having been candidates for the Conservative Party this election with allegations made against them with no action having been taken. The BBC did not question Robert Buckland on this further, and let his claim go unchallenged.¹¹

⁸ <https://twitter.com/BBCPolitics/status/1201090489354637314?s=19>

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/live/2019/nov/22/general-election-2019-corbbyn-tells-voters-to-make-sure-their-voice-is-heard-live-news?page=with:block-5dd8487e8f080fd59fb15a4f#block-5dd8487e8f080fd59fb15a4f>

¹⁰ <https://www.indy100.com/article/michael-gove-interview-brexit-boris-johnson-islamophobia-general-election-bbc-9201241>

¹¹ <https://twitter.com/BBCPolitics/status/1199777728389468160?s=19>