

Ann Widdecombe's Murder and the Politics of Incitement in the UK

Opposition Reform UK Party spokesperson for Home Affairs and Immigration, Zia Yusuf, gave a press conference on the 15th July about the brutal murder of his fellow Reform UK Party member, Ann Widdecombe. Widdecombe was formerly a prominent Conservative Party cabinet minister before prominent Reform figure. Counter-terrorism officers were investigating what police described as a targeted attack, although its precise motivation had not yet been established. Yusuf rightly implored that politicians must be able to speak without fearing violence, and yet his fears appear to be one-sided.

He argued that rival politicians and sections of the media had created a climate in which Reform UK was portrayed as an urgent danger that had to be stopped. He cited David Lammy's characterisation of Widdecombe as a "poisonous bigot", Wes Streeting's remark that "if only science had a cure for Ann Widdecombe" and bemoaned comparisons between Reform and fascism or Nazism. Reform UK says that said such rhetoric had become so extreme and persistent that it "risks constituting incitement".

Some of Yusuf's examples were stripped of important context, and there is presently no public evidence that Widdecombe's alleged killer was influenced by any of those statements. Nevertheless, his central proposition deserves consideration. Language that repeatedly presents people as poisonous, existentially dangerous or holding values at odds with the community can contribute to an atmosphere in which intimidation appears permissible. But Yusuf's attempt to frame his party as the victim of a "climate of incitement" ignores Reform UK's own use of highly inflammatory rhetoric.

Yusuf himself has repeatedly described the migration of asylum-seekers into the UK as an "invasion". Launching Reform's mass-deportation proposals, he asked: "How many more people must die at the hands of those who should never have been in our country in the first place?" Nigel Farage, leader of the Reform UK Party, has employed a similar form of generalisation. In 2024, he said that a "growing number" of young Muslims did not subscribe to British values and "loathe much of what we stand for". He connected this claim to pro-Palestinian demonstrations. Farage's intervention after the Southport stabbing attack where three little girls aged between six and nine years of age were murdered and many others seriously wounded added fuel to the fire of rage that swept over the days following. As false claims spread that the attacker was a Muslim asylum seeker, Farage jumped into the boiling cauldron to raise the question of whether "the truth is being withheld from us". He did not repeat the false allegation specifically but posing that question while the angry rumour was accelerating on social media lent credibility to the idea of an official cover-up. Anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant disorder followed: a mosque in Southport was attacked, a hotel housing asylum seekers in Rotherham was besieged and set alight and violent rioting spread throughout the country and over a thousand people have been charged

with participating in these riots. Farage did not initiate these riots, but his rhetoric played its part. The same concern applies to Farage's call for "pure cold rage" after body-camera footage showed the dying Henry Nowak being handcuffed after his Sikh killer falsely accused him of racism. The BBC later apologised after a presenter incorrectly rendered the phrase as "white cold rage". Nevertheless, his address framed one appalling case as evidence of systemic "anti-white prejudice", invoked "white lives" in contrast with Black Lives Matter and transformed the conduct of particular officers into a national racial grievance.

Discussion of 'grooming gangs' demands similar care. The abuse of vulnerable girls by networks containing substantial numbers of Pakistani-heritage men in some towns in the UK was real, and institutional cowardice helped offenders escape proper scrutiny. But then-Reform MP Rupert Lowe's phrase, "the mass rape of young white working-class girls by gangs of Pakistani rapists", turned the identity of particular offenders into a broader story about Pakistani or Muslim men collectively. The Casey audit identified important local patterns while emphasising deficiencies in national data and warning that evidence must not be exploited to spread hatred against entire communities. The Reform Party has rejected the far-right anti-Muslim campaigner Tommy Robinson and has not endorsed attacks on Muslims or asylum seekers, but Robinson's politics thrives on themes already normalised within parts of mainstream discourse: migrants as invaders, Muslims as culturally disloyal, and individual crimes as evidence of collective danger. Multiple officials within the Reform UK Party have posted calls for "an Islam-free England," comparing migrants to "rats," and sharing Islamophobic memes so extreme that they have been disciplined by their party leadership. The scapegoating of Muslims and migrants for the decline of the UK is not restricted to Reform UK. Both the Labour Party and the Conservative Party have contributed to creating distorted impressions that have raised tensions to boiling point and only complain when the pot boils over. These parties all represent an establishment that continues to enrich itself while deflecting the frustrations of the poor towards migrants and Muslims.

**Written for the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir by
Abdul Hamid Martin**