EU needs to take a stand on improving black and ethnic minority representation

Written by Sajjad Karim on 22 October 2018 in Opinion
Opinion

With the number of black and ethnic minority MEPs likely to fall post-Brexit, the fight against Islamophobia will become more important than ever, warns Sajjad Karim.

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Earlier this month, the President of the European Parliament, Antonio Tajani, agreed to take down - at my request - an Islamophobic election campaign poster located outside of the building.

This clearly showed Muslims alongside the wording 'Because we need to work together to manage migration', thus seemingly creating an equivalency between managing migration and limiting the entry of Muslims into Europe.

At the same time, I was speaking at an event inside the Parliament in association with the Anti-Racism and Diversity Intergroup. It was to mark the launch of a toolkit that has been specifically designed to help member states avoid exactly this type of Islamophobic content in their messaging.

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I'm sure you will not be surprised to read that the irony was not lost on me that these two things - the poster, which is part of the Parliament's £29m communications campaign for the 2019 European elections and the event - happened simultaneously.

While I recognise the significant minor victory that having the poster being taken down represents, the whole saga points towards a much wider issue than just this incident. Not only does it add to the already confused debate around immigration and asylum, which panders to the very stereotypes that extremists wish to establish, the fact that the Parliamentary department responsible for communications managed to overlook the unfortunate content of this poster speaks volumes about the extent of the problem within the EU and the European institutions themselves.

One merely has to look to the number of black and ethnic minority communities (BME) MEPs elected in 2014 to realise their lack of representation. Around half of these deputies are British - 17 out of 751, which means at the next election post-Brexit, this number is likely to shrink significantly.

As for diversity within the internal workforce of the EU institutions, it is impossible to know how varied it is, as no institution officially collects data on the racial or ethnic make-up of its workforce. However, we only have to look at President Juncker's cabinet to see that Brussels has been pale, male and stale for far too long now.

> "We only have to look at President Juncker's cabinet to see that Brussels has been pale, male and stale for far too long now"

If the representation of BME communities within the European Parliament is not going to change anytime soon, then what can be done to counter this narrative of Islamophobia?

First, the messaging from the top needs to be corrected. The institutions must practice what they preach when it comes to populism, nationalism, inclusivity, diversity and discrimination.

Like many Muslims across Europe, my family and I have been targeted by anti-Islam extremists, so the Parliament should be actively opposing Islamophobia, not pandering to it.

If this poster is indicative of the message the EU wants to send out for next year's elections, then Europe is in a very precarious state indeed.

In any case, it is clear that this Islamophobic rhetoric is already firmly embedded in current political discourse. This makes countering this narrative even more important in the run up to the 2019 European Elections.

Otherwise, there is a real risk at the next election that populist and nationalist parties will increase their share of the vote.

If this happens, our problem on this issue will become even greater.

About the author

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[European Commission](#) [10]
[Justice and Rights](#) [11]
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[Education and skills](#) [12]
[Employment](#) [13]
[Public order, justice and rights](#) [14]
[Society and welfare](#) [15]

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