

A plea for moderation

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I can't be alone in finding the last couple of days very trying.

The murder of Jo Cox was deeply shocking. There has been a rightful outpouring of emotion, in my opinion, but I admit she was a member of the broader community in which I have worked for quite some time. Maybe that is why I am also so shocked by the reaction of so many to what has happened.

To say the necessary first: I do not believe that any mainstream politician in the UK could be, let alone should be, blamed for what has happened. I do not condone any such claims. They are wrong.

But those claims that suggest - and I have had them in social media and in person and the idea also seems common in some parts of the press - that this action is that of a mentally ill person, as if that is what should be expected of such people - are as wrong.

I am fortunate to have never suffered a mental illness that I am aware of. But I have been close to and carer for some who have. I am not going to claim expertise as a result: I only have some experience of the impact mental illness has, how hard it is to get help, and that it seems to be harder now than it was in the past. But the one thing I have learned is that those who are mentally ill live in communities, are frequently unidentifiable to those around them, and are rarely a cause of concern to anyone beyond themselves and those who know them best. The number who need to be isolated is a tiny proportion of the whole, and they are usually a threat to themselves.

So, if a person has committed a political crime (and we cannot know that as yet, although I share the feeling of our major party leaders that this looks likely to be the case) then it is not acceptable to suggest that this is down to illness because that maligns those with mental illness, shows a massive lack of understanding of the condition of the vast majority of those who do suffer in that way, and anyway ignores the fact that the person committing the crime still lived in society and was open to all the influences within it. The claim that the person was a loner is absurd: again, vast numbers of people meet that criteria and are no threat to anyone. Living alone and

showing signs of the conventional perception of introversion (which is itself hopelessly misunderstood, which I can say with confidence as I am one) is not a diagnosis for any known risk.

I do not deny that in a tiny number of cases mental illness can induce a person to kill. However, even when that happens, and particularly if there is a supposed political motive (and this is known, of course) that person's distorted political logic is not bred in isolation. No one's is.

Again, I stress, I am not suggesting any mainstream UK politician has offered views that should result in such hatred that a murder might follow. I am confident in saying that.

I am equally confident in suggesting that racism, which I think to be a form of hatred, is a feature of UK politics. I have, for example, said for some time that I am willing to offer advice to any UK political party that asks so long as they are not racist. When asked what that means I have been explicit: I will not advise UKIP. I do think it is racist. The poster it published in Thursday was clear indication of that, in my opinion.

And I do think that parts of the EU referendum campaign have been based on the promotion of irrational fear and intolerance. This has not only been on race grounds. Experts have also been mentioned, but that's a euphemism for the intellectual, and they have always been near to the top of the list when the politics of division is being constructed.

I in no way think or suggest that all who will vote Leave next week are racist. I know full well they are not.

Nor do I suggest voting Leave endorses racist views. It does not.

Nor am I saying that discussion of migration is racist: as I have made clear on this blog such discussion is needed and is appropriate.

But just as some who are promoting Remain have in other spheres used far too many crude metaphors (scroungers, the work shy, and so on) so too are too many in the Leave campaign guilty of using crude metaphors that incite division.

I will be clear: this does also require a careful review of the language of the left as well. I am not excluding it from review. Very obviously left wing politics has also used the language of hate on occasion. So let me be clear that I am not wishing to take a single sided view here. I will be considering my own language in future to consider whether on occasion it is too broad brushed and sweeping in its generalisations. If change is demanded it may be so of us all.

But it's saddening (I won't use the word depressing) that many seem to have no awareness of that and what has even been going on. I hope for greater awareness of the need for moderation, even when opinion is strongly held and oppression is real, in

due course. As Jo Cox said in her maiden speech, it is still likely that there is more that binds us together than separates if only we are to look. But I am not hopeful that many will take heed.