

Peter Womack 

# Defined As

In March 2024, the then UK Communities Secretary, Michael Gove, unveiled a new official definition of ‘extremism’. It turned out to be something of a damp squib, but the attendant announcements and guidance notes suggested that he meant it to be important. The exercise was informed, then, by the assumption that defining a word may be a consequential political act in itself. Is that so? Is there a politics of lexicography?

If there is, its key issue is authority. Most people do think of definitions as authoritative: if you do not understand a word, you look it up and the dictionary tells you, definitively, what it means. The position of the definer is therefore a powerful one; you can see why a politician might like to occupy it. Take this passage from a local authority leaflet about child safeguarding:

What is extremism?

Extremism is defined as:

‘vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs.’<sup>1</sup>

The definition is politically slanted, but it presents itself as the straight answer to a straight question: what is extremism? It does not even admit to having an author; the definition of the word appears as an impersonal fact. This effect of objectivity has obvious ideological advantages. In Orwell’s *1984*, sinister philologists rewrite the dictionary so as to make the English language incapable of expressing liberal ideas. If you can determine what words mean, you can control thought.

Of course that is one of Orwell’s boldly Swiftian simplifications. Real-life lexicographers do not wield such power, and a definition is not a once-for-all edict; it is common for a single word to be defined variously, depending on what the definition is for. So ‘salt’, say, will have one definition in a dictionary for foreign learners of English, and a different one in a glossary for students of chemistry. Definitions which are adapted to particular contexts in this way can hardly claim general

authority. But among these contexts, there is at least one in which definitions really are designed to be arbitrarily authoritative—namely, the specification of terms that normally forms part of the text of a law. A legislator's definition is not the same thing as a lexicographer's, because the legislator actually is in the business of exercising power.

An almost comic illustration of the difference can be found in the Public Order Act (2023). One part of this measure makes it an offence to interfere with the use or operation of 'any key national infrastructure'. The phrase is certainly in need of interpretation, and a lexicographer, asked to produce a definition, would probably assemble one from its components, glossing first 'infrastructure' ('a collective term for the subordinate parts of an undertaking'), then 'key' ('of paramount or crucial importance') and then 'national' ('affecting or shared by a whole nation').<sup>2</sup> Although the legislators in this case undertake to explain what 'key national infrastructure' means, and therefore sound for a moment as if they will be engaged in a similar task, it soon becomes clear that they are doing nothing of the sort:

In this section "key national infrastructure" means—

- (a) road transport infrastructure,
- (b) rail infrastructure,
- (c) air transport infrastructure,
- (d) harbour infrastructure,
- (e) downstream oil infrastructure,
- (f) downstream gas infrastructure,
- (g) onshore oil and gas exploration and production infrastructure,
- (h) onshore electricity generation infrastructure, or
- (i) newspaper printing infrastructure.<sup>3</sup>

So far from explaining what is meant by 'infrastructure', this merely repeats the word itself, apparently in the belief that it is self-explanatory. Despite what they say, the authors of this section are not really interested in meaning. Rather, the function of their definition is to delineate a class of objects which one can be prosecuted for disrupting. The class has no general validity: it exists only for the purposes of this law, and according to a later clause it can be altered by statutory instrument—that is to say, 'key national infrastructure' denotes what the Secretary of State may at any time say it does. The expression is semantically empty in the same way as 'category A prison' or 'grade 2 listed building': the definition is not an exposition of what the words mean, it is the label on a box.

The opposite kind of definition is elegantly exemplified, as it happens, by another account of 'extremism', produced in 2016 as part of the

judgment in a libel case.<sup>4</sup> The Chief Imam at an Islamic centre, Shakeel Begg, had been described as an extremist on a BBC current affairs television programme and was seeking damages; the BBC's defence was that what had been said about him was substantially true. The judge in the case, Mr Justice Haddon-Cave, therefore needed a usable definition of 'extremism', so that he could determine whether it was an accurate description of the claimant's publicly expressed views. He evolved his definition by positing that the 'extreme' is 'by definition' what is not 'moderate', turning accordingly to mainstream Islamic authorities for statements of moderate opinion on a range of doctrinal and political issues, and then measuring extreme positions by their distance from the moderate ones.

Although the resulting definition was devised for legal purposes, it is not a 'legal definition'. It does not assume the authority to dictate a meaning for the word; rather, it regards the question 'what does it mean?' as an empirical one, which can only be answered after a certain amount of research. Moreover, in constructing a contrast between 'extremist' and 'moderate' views on the same issues, it is basing its interpretation on the everyday sense of the word 'extreme'. That is, it takes it that 'extremism' means what it *looks* as if it means. All this can seem a little vague compared with the hard categorial edges of legal definition, but that is because Haddon-Cave is trying to establish what in some legal contexts is called the 'ordinary and natural meaning' of the word—the concept it would immediately convey to a reasonably well-informed hearer. This is, after all, where the legal question of damages comes from: if the BBC has harmed Begg's reputation, it must be by the impression of him that was formed in the mind of a person hearing the description—so what matters is not what an Act of Parliament or a Secretary of State declares extremism to be, but what this notional hearer understands by the word. In short, Haddon-Cave is in the territory of the lexicographer: usage.

Contrast that field with Gove's. As we saw earlier, the existing official definition of extremism was

vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs.<sup>5</sup>

And the new version, officially introduced as 'updated and more precise', reads like this:

the promotion or advancement of an ideology based on violence, hatred or intolerance, that aims to:

1. negate or destroy the fundamental rights and freedoms of others; or
2. undermine, overturn or replace the UK's system of liberal parliamentary democracy and democratic rights; or
3. intentionally create a permissive environment for others to achieve the results in (1) or (2).<sup>6</sup>

In both versions, the definition is also, or even primarily, a condemnation. In the old one, 'extremism' means opposition to 'liberty and mutual respect and tolerance'; in the revision, it is, to much the same effect, 'based on violence, hatred or intolerance'. Both thus define an 'extremist' as an enemy of the good; the implicit author is not just an observer of linguistic usage, but a champion of allegedly consensual national values. This implication was spelt out in the House of Commons statement that accompanied the launch. Gove named five organisations that gave 'cause for concern' and said 'We will be holding these, and other organisations, to account to assess if they meet our definition of extremism and will take action as appropriate.'<sup>7</sup> To assess whether something meets a definition is an exercise in semantics, involving nothing more concrete than placing the particular instance inside or outside a given set. But Gove's formulation mixes this operation up with a different one: 'holding to account'. This expression connotes the scrutiny not of words but of people. It suggests that Gove's somewhat shadowy 'we' will not only be merely matching an organisation against a description but also requiring it to defend itself against an accusation; if it fails to do so, it will apparently incur an equally shadowy penalty. Definition has moved across from the sphere of interpretation to that of power.

The rewrite is designed to enhance the power. The most obvious innovation is the division into three numbered sections. With its fussy reference back from 3) to 1) and 2), it makes the definition *look* like a section from an Act of Parliament. This is curious, because the official preface to the definition correctly insists that it 'is not statutory and has no effect on the existing criminal law'. In a sort of linguistic cos-play, the text is pretending to be a law, aware all along that it is not. The costume does not only consist of the layout on the page but also features tortuous chains of abstractions. Thus, by selecting from the alternatives presented at each syntactic stage, we can see that extremism might for example consist of *promoting* an ideology, which is *based on* intolerance and *aims to intentionally create an environment* for others to *achieve* the *replacement* of the UK's system of democracy. The six-fold pile-up

of process words makes it almost impossible for a reader to trace a coherent thought through this sentence: what would the person who is described in this fashion actually have been doing? The purpose of the writing is not only to convey an idea but also to construct a cat's-cradle of criteria which encloses as much objectionable political behaviour as possible. This tactical emphasis is confirmed by the supporting documents. For example, a preface explains that the new definition has been produced because an increase in the extremist threat means that more powerful tools are needed to counter it: This implicitly admits that the definition is not an objective account of what extremism is, but an instrument for defeating its exponents. We are still in the fiction, or fantasy, that the text is a piece of legislation, determining which behaviours are permitted and which are punished.

On the other hand, the initiative continues to take advantage of the fact that it is *not* a piece of legislation. In the House of Commons, Gove promised that the new definition would not affect 'people like gender critical campaigners, or environmental groups'. But obviously it is possible that at some time in the future, 'people like' environmentalists might do things that fall within the scope of the definition, so Gove's assurance is quite arbitrary. It reveals his underlying assumption that, whatever the form of words may say, he will retain the discretion to decide who is 'affected' and who is not. If he were really writing a law, this assumption would fail because, in the end, the rules would be interpreted independently by a court. But so long as the whole performance remains within the sphere of official guidance and procedure, meaning can be kept in-house. The air of legislative rigour is fraudulent.

Within the field of definition, then, this is a hybrid specimen. It is not a lexicographical definition, because it offers neither information nor evidence about the meaning of the word in ordinary speech. But it is not a legal definition either, because it makes a point of its non-statutory character. What is it for, and what is its force? Its own answer to that question is that the State should not fund, or engage in partnership with, 'extremist' groups, and that the definition will help officials spot the organisations to avoid. This is not convincing. A limited function of that kind would not require the public fanfare with which the thing was launched, and in any case, 'extremism' is not the sole criterion for such decisions. An earlier draft, for instance, identified certain groups as 'divisive forces within Muslim communities';<sup>8</sup> if that is true, it is an excellent reason for not funding them from a community cohesion budget, whether they are 'extremist' or not. The definition of that one word is both more and less than is needed for its declared purpose.

Rather, what seems to be happening is an attempt to direct the application of the word as it appears in day-to-day political circulation. By blurring the distinction between legal and lexicographical kinds of defining, the initiative seeks to bring a pseudo-judicial authority to bear on general usage and so to influence what we mean by it. It does after all intend the simple effect that appeared at the beginning of this article: a definitive answer for somebody who asks what extremism is. At this point, it matters that, for example, the definition places extremism at an opposite pole to Britishness, while many of the organisations that give particular 'cause for concern' draw their membership from immigrant communities. Among its other rhetorical functions, the pedantic, quasi-legislative tone serves to muffle the shrillness of the dog whistle.

The whole performance was perhaps modelled on a more formidable precursor: the characterisation of 'anti-semitism', which, agreed at a plenary session of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance in May 2016, was subsequently accepted by many institutions, rejected by some and forced upon others. This document—'the IHRA definition'<sup>9</sup>—has proved widely influential, but it too begins by disavowing statutory authority: its full title, 'The non-legally binding International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance working definition of antisemitism', fits two separate disclaimers into a dozen words. There were further caveats later from the lead author of the definition, Kenneth Stern, who has engagingly described it an aid for bean counters.<sup>10</sup> That is, researchers associated with the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) were trying to compile a picture of the extent of antisemitism across different times and countries, so it was important that they should all be logging the same kind of thing, and the original function of the definition was to help ensure this consistency.

Accordingly, the document offers the researchers as many different manifestations of anti-semitism as it can; the result is a very loose and inclusive kind of 'definition'. A short definition is followed by an introductory sentence, which reads as follows:

To guide IHRA in its work, the following examples may serve as illustrations:

Then a somewhat miscellaneous paragraph of reflections on antisemitism leads, confusingly, into a second introductory sentence:

Contemporary examples of antisemitism in public life, the media, schools, the workplace, and in the religious sphere could, taking into account the overall context, include, but are not limited to:

This time a bullet-pointed list of 11 examples does follow the colon. But these are rendered provisional by the way they have been framed. They are ‘*examples*’, which ‘*may* serve as *illustrations*’; incidents of antisemitism ‘*could*, taking into account the overall context, *include*’ the items on the list, but there could be others, not mentioned here. Several of the bullet points themselves contain further ‘e.g.’s. Everything about the document’s self-presentation says that it wants to be read not only as a categorical authority but also as a repertoire of suggestions, which the data collectors are to use by the light of their own judgment.

A definition marked by such paradoxical indefiniteness might well be useful to the bean counters, but since then, it has been put to very different uses, and it is these that have turned it into a *cause célèbre*. In the United States, following a lengthy campaign, the Antisemitism Awareness Act, passed by the House of Representatives in May 2024, applied the IHRA definition to Title 6 of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which provides that ‘No person in the United States shall, on the ground of race, color, or national origin ... be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.’<sup>11</sup> This conjunction means that any organisation which can be shown to be antisemitic, according to the IHRA definition, or to any one of its illustrative examples,<sup>12</sup> is judged to be discriminating against Jewish Americans and therefore ceases to be entitled to Federal funding. The financial connection has the effect of transforming the definition from one kind of implement into another. Having been designed as a shovel for scooping up assorted manifestations of antisemitism, it is repurposed as a razor for dividing deserving from undeserving recipients of Government grants.

Its career in the United Kingdom is different, but has led to the same kind of reassignment. Its publication in the spring of 2016 coincided with an explosion of accusations of antisemitism within the British Labour Party, which continued for the rest of Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership, fuelled both by internal factional struggles and by the delighted opportunism of Labour’s political opponents. In April 2018, Corbyn attempted to mend fences through a meeting with leaders of the national Jewish community, and one of their suggestions was that the Labour Party should adopt the IHRA definition, as numerous institutions had already done.<sup>13</sup> In July, the Party’s National Executive Committee agreed to adopt the definition, but excepted four of the examples, because they are examples of hostility not so much to Jews as to the State of Israel, and NEC members wanted to keep open a space in which one could articulate radical criticism of the Israeli government without being convicted of antisemitism. The result of this decision was an argument of extraordinary ferocity about the four



deleted examples, and in September, Labour reluctantly restored them to its adopted definition. The argument had almost nothing to do with the content of the four articles themselves. It was rather that the IHRA definition had come to symbolise the repudiation of antisemitism as such, so that to adopt it with some clauses missing was understood as a deliberately incomplete gesture of assent, as if Labour was reserving the right to go on being *a little bit* antisemitic.

It was a right-wing victory, and it encouraged other forays over the following year or two, including, for example, a Government insistence that the definition should be adopted by all universities. In October 2020, the then Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson, sent a letter to Vice-Chancellors complaining at the slow take-up, and adding, 'If I have not seen the overwhelming majority of institutions adopting the definition by Christmas then I will act'.<sup>14</sup> By 'acting', he apparently meant getting the Office for Students, the supposedly independent regulatory body for higher education, to consider suspending funding streams to non-compliant institutions. The headmasterly tone of the instruction contrasts oddly with its vagueness. Williamson does not say what internal purposes the definition is to serve once it has been adopted; nor does he explain how adopting it will lead to the stated objective, which is the protection of Jewish students from harassment and discrimination. All that is required is the simple act of adopting it. The document thus becomes a pure emblem of orthodoxy, recalling the State's control of universities in earlier centuries through Test Acts and oaths of allegiance.

By this point, then, the unassuming 'non-legally binding working definition' had evolved into a highly authoritarian text, not only commanding reverence in itself but also capable, in its applications, of terminating careers and influencing elections. This reversal is perhaps not as surprising as it seems at first. A definition that *was* legally binding would no doubt have more undeniable authority, but it would pay for it by its circumscription: a legal definition, as we have seen, is valid only in specified contexts, for specified purposes. Exactly because its authorisation is not specified, the IHRA definition has a much more extensive applicability. It is explicitly provisional and flexible. Its institutional focus is weak because the IHRA is not a well-known organisation; as a result, the document appears as authorless and universal in scope. As one might expect, then, its provisions, the notorious examples, are equally wide-ranging. To take just one of them, a contemporary example of antisemitism is



Using the symbols and images associated with classic antisemitism (e.g., claims of Jews killing Jesus or blood libel) to characterize Israel or Israelis.

This embraces an open-ended repertoire of symbols and images. ‘Classic antisemitism’ is not a well-defined category to begin with, and in any case, the formula is not confined to it, because it also takes in imagery that is merely ‘associated with’ it, and that phrase—‘associated with’—can cover a lot of distance in particular cases. For example, the *Guardian*’s cartoonist of 40 years, Steve Bell, lost his job over a drawing of Netanyahu using a surgical implement to cut a Gaza-shaped chunk out of his own stomach.<sup>15</sup> It fell within the scope of this clause because it was ‘associated with’ the cutting out of a pound of flesh by the villainous Jew in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* (which is undoubtedly both antisemitic and a classic, and perhaps therefore an instance of classic antisemitism). The allusion was not intended, and it makes no sense in relation to the point of the cartoon. But the fact that it occurred to somebody—anybody—seems to have been enough to form the prohibited ‘association’.

This associative freedom is innocuous in the context of the definition’s original function. Antisemitism is disreputable in many political cultures around the world, so you would expect its expression to be often under the radar, and the ‘bean counters’ have to allow for the implicit or duplicitous forms in which their object might appear. But when the document is elevated to the status of a pseudo-law (as it has been by the *Guardian*, by the Jewish Labour Movement, by the US Congress), its informality becomes a weapon. It is not only that the conversational looseness of its categories enables it to expose an immense range of discursive behaviour to the accusation of antisemitism. It is also that the IHRA definition, floating free of any judicature, any formally constituted authority, is therefore also free of the legal mechanisms of defence, mitigation, proportionality and so on. It applies not in a specified set of circumstances but anywhere and anyhow. And those who are captured by it have no tribunal to which they can protest their innocence, because they have been convicted not by a human judge, but by a simple semantic fact: this is what antisemitism has been defined as. In that sense, definition approaches the Orwellian condition that Gove could only dream of: the godlike power to dictate what a word is to mean in real language use.

## Notes

- 1 Derby and Derbyshire Safeguarding Children Partnership, <https://www.ddscp.org.uk/staff-and-volunteers/info-and-resources/extremism/#:~:>

- text=What%20is%20extremism%3F,of%20different%20faiths%20and%20beliefs.
- 2 These glosses are from the *OED*.
  - 3 Public Order Act, 2023, sect 6 (7), at <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/15>.
  - 4 <https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/shakeel-begg-v-bbc-judgment-final-20161028.pdf>.
  - 5 Text from the revised Prevent duty guidelines, 2015 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevent-duty-guidance-england-scotland-and-wales-2015/#:~:text=The%20Government%20has%20defined%20extremism,of%20different%20faiths%20and%20beliefs>).
  - 6 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/new-definition-of-extremism-2024/new-definition-of-extremism-2024#the-definition>.
  - 7 Rajeev Syal and Ben Quinn, 'Gove faces legal action threats after suggesting Muslim groups are extremist', *Guardian*, 14 March 2024.
  - 8 Ben Quinn, 'From left to far right, which groups could end up on the UK extremism list?', *Guardian*, 14 March, 2024.
  - 9 <https://holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definition-antisemitism>.
  - 10 See <https://kennethsstern.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/ABA-state-ment-121522c.pdf>, and <https://web.archive.org/web/20210116152556/https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/steering-the-biden-administration-wrong-on-anti-semitism>.
  - 11 The Antisemitism Awareness Act, as it came before the House of Representatives, is H.R. 6090. See <https://www.congress.gov/118/bills/hr6090/BILLS-118hr6090ih.pdf>. For the Civil Rights Act, see <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/civil-rights-act>; the relevant clause is Sec. 601.
  - 12 This important detail is the effect of Sections 4 and 5 of the Antisemitism Awareness Act, taken together.
  - 13 This and the surrounding sequence of events are helpfully set out in an appendix to Greg Philo et al, *Bad News For Labour: Antisemitism, the Party and Public Belief* (London: Pluto Press, 2019), pp. 189-223.
  - 14 Richard Adams, 'Williamson accuses English universities of ignoring antisemitism', *Guardian*, 9 October 2020.
  - 15 Details reported by Rich Johnston in *Bleeding Cool*, 17 October, 2023 – <https://bleedingcool.com/comics/steve-bell-dropped-guardian-benjamin-netanyahu-cartoon/>.

## Author Biography

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