

Biden's law against bigotry is an important first step. It should not be the last.

By Dennis Sammut

Last week President Joe Biden signed into law the *COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act* that had just passed through Congress.

The law had broad bipartisan support in both houses of Congress. Unusually, given the current political climate in the United States, it passed through the Senate with 94 votes in favour and only one against. The momentum for support of the law resulted from a spate of high-profile attacks on Asian-Americans in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic that shocked all responsible and law-abiding citizens.

Reports of violence against Asian Americans spiked since the beginning of the pandemic as some Americans somehow associated COVID-19 with Chinese, or other Asian minorities, a view that was given some credence by statements by Donald Trump when he was still in office.

This was the latest in a series of hysterical reactions fuelled by an ill-informed section of the American public, and sometimes encouraged by irresponsible statements of populist politicians. It was certainly not the first. One remembers the wave of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim hysteria after the 9/11 attacks. Then, and since, many innocent people became victims of violence and more, simply because they were Arabs or Muslims. Sometimes even people who were neither, but were perceived to be because of their dress or customs, for example Sikhs, were also attacked.

Bigotry is far from being an exclusive American phenomena. In Europe it is used by those propagating anti-semitism, or Islamophobia. Both are often manipulated to garner support for populist political parties, especially on the extreme right. It is a sort of radicalisation that is often conveniently ignored. One needs only to see how the "migrants" issue is politicised and manipulated to understand that this is far from being a small fringe problem, but has deep societal roots. In Britain for example, whilst many supported Brexit for perfectly legitimate political reasons, others used bigoted statements – for example about the "millions of Polish workers", or the "impending arrival of sixty million Turks" in their political discourse in support of Brexit without flicking an eyelid. Studies also show that many people when asked how many migrants arrived in Europe, or in their own country, in recent years quote astronomically exaggerated figures that bear no resemblance to reality.

And this is not a western problem either. In Russia and China there have often been outbursts of violence and popular outrage against black people, blamed without any shred of proof, for this or that ailment in society.

All societies, even the most tolerant, harbour some element of an "us and them" syndrome. People who are different in whatever way – be it race, religion, sexual orientation or language are often blamed for grievances that are none of their doing. Legislating against hate crimes is an important step. The force of the law must be there to stop this. But this is a deep rooted problem, and requires a holistic approach.

First step must be education, in schools and beyond. Valuing diversity not as a weakness but a strength for country and society is an idea that has to be embedded in the school curriculum. In multi-ethnic communities in big cities school children of different ethnicities and backgrounds grow up together, and tend to be able to deal with this issue much better when they grow older. Ironically

the worst problems are in mono-ethnic communities, where being different is still seen at best as odd, at worst, an invalidity. Here the school curriculum will need to play its role in educating future generations.

Education however needs to be beyond the school class. More needs to be done to engage women in the fight against bigotry, for it is in the home that most problems start and where most solutions lay. Governments and civil society across the world need to increase their engagement with women to get them to be the vanguard of the fight against bigotry. There are now many tools that can help this process, including social media.

But the problem in the United States, as indeed in other countries too is also related to how politicians continue to manipulate bigotry as a tool to score short term political gains, and how often other politicians who do not share their views, are reluctant to challenge them.

Thus minorities, especially if they are recent migrants or refugees, are often blamed for economic problems, lack of jobs, overcrowded schools and hospitals and other shortcomings. They become easy targets, often soft targets because they are not organised well enough to respond, and certainly not mobilised enough to matter in elections.

Legislation against hate crimes is a positive step, but equally important is zero tolerance of bigotry in the political discourse. Here the so-called silent majority needs to speak to thwart a drift to intolerance. Political parties, trade unions, religious groups and civil society organisations must start by weeding out bigots from their midst, but that should only be the first step. They have a responsibility to also challenge bigotry in all its forms when it raises its ugly head. As president Biden said when signing the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act into law, "Silence is complicity and we cannot be complicit. We have to speak out."

There is however one word of warning. In the fight against bigotry the solution is not to put problems under the carpet, or to take political correctness to the point where people cannot air concerns, even if they are misguided. The sharpest tools against bigotry must always be education, information and persuasion. As much as legislating against excesses, Governments need to work with partners in civil society to address the issues within communities.

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