

Testimony of the Muslim Association of Newfoundland and Labrador

House of Commons Committee on Canadian Heritage

October 23, 2017

Thank you, Madam Chair.

I greet you all with the Islamic greeting: Assalamu Alaikum Wa Rahmatullahu Wa Barakatahu - May Peace, Mercy and Blessings of God be upon you all.

My name is Mansoor Pirzada. I am a Dermatologist by profession and currently practicing in St. John's. I am also the President of MANAL, the Muslim Association of Newfoundland and Labrador. We are a charitable non-profit organization managed by volunteers who have their own professional careers. We are engaged in religious, educational and outreach activities as well as close partnerships with other faith groups. Our mission is to contribute to the well being of our members, the larger community of our province and our fellow Canadians.

The Muslim population in Newfoundland and Labrador is over 2000 people. We had a recent boost with the arrival of around 200 Syrian refugees.

Madam Chair, probably to the surprise of many, the experience of Muslims living in our province had historically been more positive than negative. The credit is shared among various stakeholders and I would like to begin with the greatest one- that is the people of our province.

Our weather in Newfoundland and Labrador can be tough but we are blessed with a mild human climate. Our people are famous for their hospitality, kindness and welcoming attitude. Their great human qualities are best documented through the most recent Broadway Musical – Come From

Away. In a nutshell, it is the story of a small community who welcomed passengers of 9/11 flights diverted to rural Newfoundland and Labrador. What is not documented is how the same people treated their Muslim friends and neighbors in the aftermath of this tragedy. With their great wisdom, they realized that Muslims were the indirect victims. They always supported us whenever the beautiful name and teachings of our religion were hijacked as a pretext for cruel atrocities.

In the aftermath of the tragic incident in Quebec City, our political and religious leaders came together and attended our Friday Service to demonstrate their solidarity. While we were praying inside, over 1,500 Newfoundlanders and Labradoreans from all walks of life formed a symbolic yet very powerful human shield around our mosque.

Madam Chair, the second stakeholder to be credited for our unique positive experience is our own Muslim community. We truly consider our province as our homeland. We embrace and practice the same great human qualities with our fellow Newfoundlanders and Labradoreans.

Our Muslim community is diverse yet very inclusive. We contribute to the prosperity of our province not only as hard working, tax paying and law-abiding citizens but also culturally interesting and friendly neighbors. Muslim international students and faculty members bring in world class educational and research experience. Muslim professionals work in various sectors ranging from health to oil and gas industries. Muslim entrepreneurs run small and large businesses. Our children and youth boost the aging demographics of our province.

Even our Mosque is unique in Atlantic Canada because it is the only one that was built as a Mosque right from scratch. This is the only Mosque in North America which was built by collective efforts of the followers of the two major sects of Islam (Sunnis and Shiaas). As of today, this is

also the only Mosque in North America where Sunnis and Shiaas pray together. Madame Chair, this is our example and message of inclusiveness to all Canadians and the world.

The third stakeholder feeding into our mild human climate is the unique nature of leadership in our province. Historically, our political and religious leaders have always been constructive. They helped in promoting a safe and welcoming environment for all residents including Muslims. While visible minorities in various parts of the country have been victims of hate crimes, peace and tranquility prevailed in our province.

Madam Chair; I also would like to acknowledge the positive role of our media. Most recently, on the 25th of May, CBC's Here and Now relayed a special edition on Islam from our local mosque. The programme was greatly appreciated by viewers for its educational nature. I recall one social media commentator who wrote that the program positively changed his previously held negative perceptions about Muslims.

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/programs/hereandnow/cbc-here-and-now-may-25-2017-1.4132009>

Madam Chair; Haters exist everywhere and even our province is not completely immune to hatred. So far, our experience of Islamophobia in our province have been limited to hate speech in virtual platforms as well as indirect and subtle interventions in public spaces.

However, more recently, we started observing a worrying change in this. In a community consultation we attended few weeks ago, representatives of our provincial human rights commission pointed out that the number of Islamophobia-related complaints they receive has recently increased. What is equally alarming is that these complaints are now more about everyday encounters in public spaces such as shopping malls, grocery stores etc. More recently,

during the Thanksgiving holiday, our community woke to the news of Islamophobic posters all over Memorial University campus. The trend is now considered alarming enough to warrant “Addressing Islamophobia” consultations among community and university stakeholders. Their priority is to find ways to increase institutional capacities of service providers to address Islamophobia in our province.

So, although our experience has historically been positive, we are still worried about the future. Our main question is “for how long will our unique positive experience continue?” Will it prevail as a role model for the rest of Canada? Or are we going to lose it to the pervasiveness of hatred?

Madam Chair; I know there is an ongoing debate about the exclusive use of Islamophobia in Motion 103 and some lack of consensus about its merit, meaning and implications. I don’t want to waste our time by reproducing this debate.

However, I must say that the notion of Islamophobia has a strong conceptual merit in capturing the complexity of the problem we are dealing with and offers significant insight to the root cause. It reminds us that Muslims experience racism and discrimination because of their religious affiliation with Islam. It captures the mutually reinforcing processes of demonizing Islam and dehumanizing Muslims. It exposes that it is due to their affiliation with Islam that Muslims are categorically perceived as one single race that is inferior, uncivilized and deserving hostile treatment. This is why even non-Muslims sometimes end up being targeted when they are perceived as Muslim.

Our national unemployment statistics and research data comparing our poverty rates with other developed countries suggest that Islamophobia is not a new phenomenon in Canada. For instance, according to 2001 Statistics Canada data, Muslims in Canada have the highest

unemployment rate by religious group. Similarly, in 2007 Canada had the largest gap between Muslim and non-Muslim poverty rates in comparison with the US, France, Germany, Spain and Britain.

So, we have every reason to argue that Islamophobia really stands out in our age as one of the most pervasive manifestations of racial and religious discrimination. This is why it deserves specific acknowledgement. Moreover, in the context of Quebec City tragedy, Muslim Canadians are entitled to expect your Committee to unanimously acknowledge and thoroughly address Islamophobia.

Madam Chair, the elephant is already in our Canadian store. It already caused irrevocable damage not only to Canadian Muslims but to all Canadians who are collectively woven into the beautiful fabric of our society. So, it is not the time to play around words and politics. It is time to be united to minimize and ultimately eliminate this serious threat.

As a community leader, I am concerned with the rise in Islamophobic incidents in our province and their negative impact especially on Muslim women and youth. I consider women and youth as the future of our country. As Canadians, we cannot and shall not discriminate against them. Otherwise, we would be defying not only our own core Canadian values but also Canada's demographic and economic interests. If we want to continue to move forward on the path of past economic and social successes, we must tap the unrealized human talents and skill sets that resides in our visible minorities.

We must work together as Canadians to eliminate this cancer of systemic racism, religious discrimination and Islamophobia once and for all. It is only then we can all call ourselves Canadians without any qualifier of race, colour, language and religion.

Our recommendations are as follows:

1. Creating a national registry to record all hateful incidents involving Islamophobia and other forms of racial and religious discrimination.
2. Introducing awareness and training programs for the public as well as service providers working in various sectors including the media, education, health, social work and law enforcement. These programs need to be developed in cooperation with grassroots organizations such as Muslim Associations. They also need to be made a regular, consistent and mandatory component of school curriculum and of the annual training of professionals working in these sectors.
3. Developing and introducing programs to support victims of Islamophobia and to protect vulnerable ones who are yet to experience it. These programs too need to be developed in cooperation with grass root organizations including Muslim Associations.
4. Introducing and implementing appropriate tools that would promote equity and inclusion and eliminate racial and religious barriers to employment. In that context, we need to use an equity lens to undertake diversity and equity analysis in our budget preparation.

We hope that the work of the Honourable Committee members will lead to the development of appropriate strategy to support equity, justice, tolerance and inclusion in our beloved country. Canadian Muslims are ready to present themselves as agents of positive change. They just need to be reassured about their safety as well as their inherent and acquired dignity in the Canadian society. Thank you.