

MUSLIMS UNDER SIEGE

**Alienating
Vulnerable
Communities**

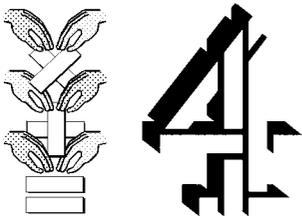
**Peter Osborne
and James
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DEMOCRATIC AUDIT, HUMAN RIGHTS CENTRE, UNIVERSITY OF ESSEX

In association with CHANNEL 4 DISPATCHES

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Peter Osborne and James Jones have written this pamphlet to accompany the Channel Four Dispatches documentary, 'It Shouldn't Happen to a Muslim', broadcast on 7 July 2008



About the authors

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Foreword

There is no such thing as the single monolithic “British Muslim community” that our politicians and media discuss. Britain’s one and a half million or so Muslims belong to a remarkably diverse set of communities; in all, it is estimated, there are over 50 ethnicities speaking almost 100 languages between them.

However it is possible to speak in generalities about their lives and experience in this country:

- They are mainly young;
- They tend to live in the most deprived cities, and a third of them live in the most deprived neighbourhoods in those cities;
- They are disadvantaged and discriminated against in housing, education and employment by comparison with other faith groups;
- Religion for Muslims is the most important factor in their lives after their family;
- They suffer disproportionately more from discrimination, racial abuse and racial attacks than any other faith group, and the more openly devout they are, the more likely they are to experience harassment and abuse.

In short, Islamophobia is heaped onto all the other disadvantages from which they suffer.

Islamophobia is nothing new for Britain’s Muslims. It is

a phenomenon that impartial observers have identified since the early 1900s, but it has grown worse since the terrorist attacks of September 2001 in the United States and the Tube and bus bombings of July 2005 in London. Insofar as it is a rational phenomenon, it seems that there is at its roots a view of Islam and Muslim culture which is as distorted as that of Osama Bin Laden and fellow extremists around the world.

The voices of ordinary British Muslims are rarely, if ever, heard amid the torrent of their rage – and, let it be clearly said, in the representation of Islam and their lives by the media in their own country. Yet when we at Democratic Audit actually talked to young Muslims across Britain we found an earnest and articulate group of youngsters for whom Islam was a religion of peace and concern for others. We also found profound feelings of fear and rejection.

There are those who deny that Islamophobia actually exists. For them the abuse and hatred of Muslims is being exaggerated to suit politicians’ needs and silence critics of Islam. They argue that the concept confuses hatred and discrimination against Muslims with entirely legitimate criticism of Islam. Of course, all religions must accept that their beliefs and practices are open to criticism, though few do so with good grace. But the discourse of Islamophobia

bites far deeper than honest debate into the lives of Britain's Muslims, raising anger and fear, as it does, and exposing them to contempt.

The deniers also state that discrimination against Muslims is not as great as it seems.

Well, Peter Osborne and James Jones put paid to that argument in their Dispatches report for Channel 4 and in this passionate and deeply humane pamphlet which they have written to accompany that programme. The incidents that they describe are symptomatic: similar incidents have happened time and time again in the past, and will continue to happen in the future unless our society takes action. The exploitative media reporting that they analyse in detail is equally a recurring phenomenon. Perhaps we expect such shoddy and soulless conduct on the part of a tabloid press which is poisoning our society in a variety of ways. But they also uncover a disturbing willingness among writers in the broadsheet press and elsewhere to indulge themselves in blatantly anti-Islamic rhetoric and argument that would, as they argue, not be tolerated if it were directed against Jews, say, or gay people.

I hope this report will give us all pause, and prompt all who care about the quality of life in this country to consider what can be done to halt this damaging and inhumane contempt for Britain's Muslims.

Professor Stuart Weir,
Director of Democratic Audit

Introduction

The seed for this pamphlet was planted in October 2006 when Jack Straw¹ and other cabinet ministers raised the issue of Muslim women wearing the veil.² It soon became clear that this was more than a random rumination from a member of the government. Rather Labour appeared to have made the extraordinary decision to try to identify with a general mood of resentment and anxiety about the presence of Muslim communities in this country and to intervene in the politics of religious identity. In doing so, they were playing with fire. John Denham, the former Home Office minister, had already warned of the “cancer of Islamophobia” infecting the nation and Straw himself had launched the first report of the Runnymede Trust’s Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia in November 1997.³

Islamophobia was already, then, a matter of great concern in the 1990s. Runnymede established the Commission after a previous report on anti-Semitism in contemporary Britain had recommended that it should urgently set up a

similar inquiry. A series of reports has since shown how Islamophobia, manifested in racial abuse and attacks, has increased after both the 9/11 and 7/7 terrorist outrages that have clearly created a deeper resentment and fear of British Muslims than existed before. It is therefore all the more important that those in positions of influence – politicians at all levels, journalists, commentators, academics – get our facts and language right in order to allow our Muslim communities to live in peace and free from fear and to prevent segregation and alienation.

However Straw’s initiative liberated the British media to take his initiative to extremes that he could not have anticipated. Soon practically every week seemed to bring forth news of some fresh outrage perpetrated by a Muslim.⁴ Cumulatively this litany of condemnation has turned into an anti-Islamic crusade. The authors of this pamphlet are members of the Church of England and if we had come under the same wave of condemnation for our practices and traditions we would by now be affronted beyond belief.

So this pamphlet investigates prejudice against Muslims. It accompanies the Channel 4 Dispatches film, “It Shouldn’t

¹ *Lancashire Telegraph* 5 October 2006 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/oct/06/politics.uk>

² http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/6040016.stm Harriet Harman 11.10.06

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-410622/Muslim-veil-symbol-womens-oppression-says-Jowell.html> Tessa Jowell 16.10.06

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/6036377.stm Gordon Brown 11.10.06

³ The report, *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*, made 60 recommendations, many of which were acted on by the government.

⁴ 2006 ‘Muslim cabbie bans ‘unclean’ guide dog’, *Daily Express*, October 7; ‘Make my pray’, *News of the World*, 22 October 22, 2006; ‘Fury as cops told ‘let off’ Muslim crooks in holy month’, *Daily Mail*, ‘Soldier abuse hospital tightens security’, *Daily Mail*, 7 October 7, 2006: ‘SECURITY is to be tightened at an NHS hospital where an injured British soldier was confronted by a Muslim man while undergoing treatment.’

Happen to a Muslim", aired on 7 July 2008, and is principally based on our experience and research while making the film. This pamphlet does, however, go beyond the thesis and contents of our Dispatches film.

The first chapter explores one particular episode: how, at the same time that Jack Straw was making his remarks, the *Sun* newspaper was able to concoct a page one splash story about a Muslim outrage aimed at British soldiers. The second chapter explores how some of Britain's leading and most respected commentators distort and twist Islam. In chapter three we document in detail fabrication of stories which hurt or damage Muslims.

We then move on to show how this twisted and vindictive public culture has its impact on British streets. Chapter four shows how the far right is starting to focus menacingly on Muslims, while chapter five chronicles physical attacks and abuse. We are emphatically not calling for special treatment for our Muslim fellow citizens: we are simply asking for fairness. The final chapter calls end our culture of vilification towards Muslims.

The patience, generosity and insight of our many interviewees have shaped the film and this pamphlet, and often the robust defence of their viewpoint has forced us to sharpen our argument. Many thanks go out to Polly Toynbee, Michael Gove MP, Patrick O'Flynn, Phil Woolas MP, Superintendent Dal Babu, Shahid Malik MP, Trevor Kavanagh, Gulam Hussein, Andy Hayman, DCI Steve Reschwamm, Mohamed Iqbal, Matthew Tait, Carol Reed, Sheila Goulden, Karen Hayes, Sobhat Hussein, Mike Coleman, Steve Batkin, Mr Mustafa, Rana Tufail, Ather Mirza,

Shoaib Ihsan, Nabila Khan, Dr Paul Symonds, Sarfraz Sarwar, Ian Morton, the Kachiwala family, Masjid Umar in Leicester, Hanif Qadir, Mohammed Mustafa, Chief Superintendent Simon Coxall, Chris Allen, Laura MacDonald, Asif Mehmood, Mr Azam, Imam Mustafa Naz and Fazilat Naz.

It has been inspirational, and always great fun, working alongside the team from the production company Quicksilver Television. We would like to thank executive producer, Eamonn Matthews, producer, Ed Watts, director, Chris Boulding and cameraman, Colin Rogal. Assistant Producer Farzana Tejani scoured the country and found a number of harrowing stories and inspirational people. Sara Kalim, Melissa D'Amico, Hannah Hatliff and Candida Pearce were supportive far beyond the call of duty. Tom Greeves came in at a late moment with his outstanding research skills. Stuart Weir and Andrew Blick of Democratic Audit edited this pamphlet with their usual calm and skill. As always we have derived enormous support and insight from Channel Four, and our thanks go to Mehdi Hasan and Dorothy Byrne, Head of News and Current Affairs, who commissioned a film which we hope and believe will lead to a better, more open and more decent public debate about Muslims in Britain.

Chapter One

HOUNDED OUT

On the morning of 7 October 2006 the *Sun* newspaper splashed a dramatic story across its front page.¹ The story – which was billed as exclusive – concerned a callous and cynical crime committed by Muslims. A team of *Sun* reporters described in graphic detail how what the paper labelled a “Muslim hate mob” had vandalised a house near Windsor. The *Sun* revealed that “vile yobs hurled bricks through windows and daubed obscenities. A message on the drive spelled out in 4ft letters: ‘Fuck off’.”

One Tory MP, Philip Davies, was quoted venting outrage at this act of vandalism. “If there’s anybody who should fuck off,” Davies was quoted as saying, “it’s the Muslims who are doing this kind of thing. Police should pull out the stops to track down these vile thugs”. The Conservative immigration spokesman, Damian Green MP, labelled it a “shocking development”.

The *Sun* left its readers under no doubt as to why the outrage had been committed. Local Muslims were waging a vendetta against four British soldiers who hoped to rent the house on their return from serving their country in Afghanistan. The paper quoted an army source saying that: “these guys have done nothing but bravely serve their country – yet they can’t even live where they

want in their own.”

Millions of *Sun* readers reading this account were entitled to feel nothing but anger and contempt for the violent and treacherous Muslims who had carried out such a disloyal act against brave British soldiers. But there was one very big problem with the *Sun* story. As this pamphlet will demonstrate, there was no Muslim involvement of any kind.

It is true that a house had been vandalised in Montagu Road, part of the comfortable and prosperous Windsor suburb of Datchet – as the *Windsor Express* had reported the previous day. It also looks very likely that the attack was connected with the potential arrival of four household cavalry officers. But when we travelled to Windsor last month it gradually became apparent that the *Sun* story about Muslim involvement in the outrage was false.

We found that Montagu Road is a secluded cul-de-sac in a fairly prosperous residential area of Windsor. The average house price in the road is around £600,000, the gardens are beautifully tended and – with the notable exception of the incessant air traffic coming into Heathrow – there is an air of almost rural tranquillity. As far as we could discover, no Muslims lived in the area at all, while the nearest significant community of Muslims is to be found in Slough, some ten miles away. To all intents and purposes Montagu Road was

¹ HOUNDED OUT, *The Sun*, 7 October 2006

a white, gated community.

This meant the *Sun* story was highly speculative at best, especially given that, according to the police, there were no witnesses to the attack. The *Sun* claim that a "Muslim hate mob" could have arrived unnoticed in tranquil Montagu Road and committed vandalism without being observed was nothing short of preposterous. Furthermore, the police denied any Muslim connection. Detective Chief Inspector Stephen Reschwamm, who investigated the incident, declared in a press release after the *Sun* article appeared that: "Inquiries carried out to date conclude that although one of our initial lines of inquiry was to consider possible racially aggravated circumstances, we never labelled any particular faith/religion as being responsible." The police concluded that there was "no evidence to suggest that this incident was racially motivated".²

In fact the real explanation for the vandalism seems much simpler, and rather closer to home. In his article for the *Windsor Express* the previous day, local journalist Paul Pickett had written a far more scrupulous piece.³ He reported that the local army barracks had received three anonymous phone calls the previous week. They were not from Muslims, however, as the *Sun* reported. They were from local residents. Pickett reported that the anonymous calls objected to the presence of soldiers because they would lower property prices in the road. He also reported that around 40 local residents had signed a petition, objecting to the soldiers moving in.

When we spoke to Detective Chief Inspector Reschwamm about the episode he conceded that the

Montagu Road crime had never been solved. However, he agreed with us that the most likely motive was local alarm that the presence of soldiers might damage house prices, while confirming that there was no evidence of any kind of Muslim involvement.⁴

As part of our researches, we spoke to Jamie Pyatt, one of the *Sun* team of journalists who wrote the exclusive front page splash. Pyatt, who himself comes from the Slough area, stood by his story. He told us that the police were being politically correct by not admitting that Muslims had carried out the crime. He told us how he heard about the story from the local paper and had then spoken to his contacts in local Combermere barracks, who told him they had received a phone call with racist overtones.

This particular call, insisted Pyatt, was not logged so there was no official record, which is why the MoD and the police could find no evidence. According to Jamie Pyatt, his contacts were under no doubt as to who vandalised the house. He claimed that there are lots of Asians on the road who could easily have seen British soldiers looking around in their combat gear.⁵ This was certainly not our impression. In fact, during the time we spent in Montagu Road, Datchet, we did not see a single man, woman or child who looked even remotely Muslim, although we spotted lots of white residents going confidently about their business. The truth is that in tranquil, leafy, suburban Montagu Road Jamie Pyatt's "Muslim hate mob" would have stuck out a mile.

Eventually even the *Sun* was forced to admit that there were problems with its story. Some four months after it appeared,

under pressure from the Press Complaints commission, a four-line correction was published, tucked away on page 4. It read: "Following our report 'Hounded out' about a soldiers' home in Datchet, Berks, being vandalised by Muslims, we have been asked to point out no threatening calls were logged at Combermere Barracks from Muslims and police have been unable to establish if any faith or religious group was responsible for the incident. We are happy to make this clear."⁶ This short announcement fell very far short of an apology. Indeed the *Sun* never has said sorry to Muslims for the outrageous public calumny that had appeared on the front page splash of 7 October 2006. It has never retracted the sensational assertion that a "Muslim hate mob" had vandalised the house.

So the *Sun* did no more than issue one minor, almost technical, retraction. That must be why, to this day, the original "Hounded Out" story can still to be found on the *Sun* website.⁷ So the lie is still out there, and the false and divisive story continues on its merry way.

What the *Sun* had done was to take a local story about a piece of vandalism, probably caused by local snobbery about the presence of soldiers – and convert it into another kind of story altogether about evil Muslims. This case is far from unique. As we discovered while researching this pamphlet, is in fact typical of reporting of the Muslim communities across large parts of the mainstream British media. Nor is it merely that newspapers are at liberty to exaggerate and distort stories about Muslims. As we will show in this pamphlet, they are also free to

² "No racial motive following incident in Datchet," Police Statement, 11 October 2006

³ "Soldiers given the cold shoulder", *Windsor Express*, 5 October 2006

⁴ Interview 9 June

⁵ Telephone interview with Jamie Pyatt, 11 June 2008

⁶ *Sun*, 15 January 2007

⁷ <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/article66292.ece>

make broad and deeply insulting generalisations about Muslims of a kind that would simply be impossible to make about any other minority group.

Imagine if the *Sun* – without serious evidence – announced on its front page that the “hate mob” which had desecrated the Montagu Road house was gay, Jewish, or made up of angry, hate-filled Liverpudlians. Imagine if the police then said that there was no foundation to the story, and that it could later be shown to be a complete distortion of the truth. It is hard to imagine Rebekah Wade surviving as editor – and the journalists who actually wrote the story would surely have been sacked.

And yet because only Muslims were libelled there were no repercussions. Nobody seems to have minded – nobody, that is, except Muslims. British society seems to have decided they do not matter very much. So their complaints count for very little, and can be safely ignored. This makes them vulnerable.

It's no wonder that the journalist Jonathan Freedland wrote this in his *Guardian* column in October 2006, at the height of the controversy unleashed by Jack Straw's attack on Muslim women who wear the veil:

“I've been trying to imagine what it must be like to be a Muslim in Britain. I guess there's a sense of dread about switching on the radio or television, even about walking into a newsagents. What will they be saying about us today? Will we be under assault for the way we dress? Or the schools we go to, or the mosques we build? Who will be on the front page: a terror suspect, a woman in a veil or, the best of both worlds,

a veiled terror suspect?”⁸

We agree with Jonathan Freedland's analysis. The purpose of this pamphlet is to sketch out this new state of affairs, and to explore its consequences. We will show that prejudice against Muslims is not just confined to words. We will show that violent attacks on innocent people are also common: we learnt of a number during the handful of weeks that we were researching this pamphlet. We will show that the far right in British politics has turned away from Jews and blacks, its traditional targets, and shifted its focus onto Muslims instead.

The history of postwar Britain is in very large part the story of enlightenment : the steady eradication of irrational fears and resentments. Prejudice against foreigners, gays and blacks has steadily been softened or in some happy cases eliminated. But one resentment remains, and today it is stronger than ever. Prejudice against Islam – Islamophobia – is Britain's last remaining socially respectable form of bigotry, as we will show in the next chapter.

⁸ *Guardian*, 18 October 2006 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/oct/18/comment.politics>

Chapter Two

ISLAMOPHOBIA: THE BIGOTRY OF THE POLITICALLY CORRECT

Islamophobia was defined in 1997 by the landmark report from the Runnymede Trust as “an outlook or world-view involving an unfounded dread and dislike of Muslims, which results in practices of exclusion and discrimination”.¹ In 2004 the then United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan noted at a United Nations conference that “when the world is compelled to coin a new term to take account of increasingly widespread bigotry that is a sad and troubling development. Such is the case with Islamophobia.”²

Notwithstanding these pronouncements, Islamophobia seems to be the last respectable prejudice available in modern Britain. As this pamphlet will illustrate, it can be encountered in the best circles: among our most famous novelists, among columnists from the *Independent* and *Guardian* newspapers, and in the Church of England. Its appeal is wide-ranging. Adherents can be found among ardent church-goers and militant atheists. “I am an Islamophobe, and proud of it,” writes *Guardian* columnist Polly Toynbee in the *Independent*.³ “Islamophobia?” the *Sunday Times* columnist Rod Liddle rhetori-

cally asks in the title of a speech, “Count me in.”⁴

Imagine Liddle declaring: “Anti-Semitism? Count me in”, or Toynbee announcing that she was “an anti-semite and proud of it.” This just wouldn’t happen and for very good reasons. Anti-semitism is recognised as an evil, noxious creed and its adherents barred from mainstream society and respectable organs of opinion. Not so Islamophobia. Its practitioners assert that Islamophobia cannot be regarded as the same as anti-semitism because the former is hatred of an ideology or a religion, not Muslims themselves.

This means there is no social, political or cultural protection of this kind for Muslims: as far as the British political, media and literary establishment is concerned the normal rules of engagement are suspended. This chapter will show how easy it is to create misleading and exaggerated stories about Islam and Muslims and get them published. It will demonstrate how it is permissible to invidiously single out Muslims in newspaper headlines in a way that would be unthinkable in any other minority, except perhaps paedophiles.

Here is Martin Amis, one of Britain best-known novelists, on Muslims. What he has to say is extraordinarily shocking. His words, if used about any other minority, might have been seen

1 Commission on Muslims and Islamophobia, *Islamophobia: a Challenge for us all*, Runnymede Trust, 1997, p. 5

2 United Nations press release, 7 December, 2004. <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2004/sgsm9637.doc.htm>

3 In defence of Islamophobia, *Independent*, 23 October 1997

4 “Is Islam Good for London”, Event organised by *Evening Standard* 13 November 2007 http://www.esadvertising.co.uk/media/images/Influentialsdebate_islam_1025.pdf

as inciting hatred, if not violence. "There is a definite urge – don't you have it?", Amis told Ginny Dougary of *The Times*: "The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets his house in order.

"Not letting them travel. Deportation – further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms. Strip-searching people who look like they're from the Middle East or from Pakistan. Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children." ⁵

Amis has since defended his remarks by asserting that he was engaged in a "thought experiment".

Here Martin Amis is doing much more than insulting Muslims. He is using the foul and barbarous language of fascism. And yet his books continue to sell, and his work continues to be celebrated. Fellow authors leap to his defence. Late last month Ian McEwan – who along with Amis has a claim to be regarded as the most acclaimed novelist of his generation came to Amis's defence. "A dear friend had been called a racist," he said. "As soon as a writer expresses an opinion against Islamism, immediately someone on the left leaps to his feet and claims that because the majority of Muslims are dark-skinned, he who criticises it is racist." This was logically absurd and morally unacceptable. "Martin is not a racist. And I myself despise Islamism, because it wants to create a society that I detest, based on religious belief, on a text, on lack of freedom for women, intolerance towards homosexuality and so on – we know it well." ⁶

5 "The Voice of Experience," *The Times*, 9 September 2006 <http://www.ginnydougary.co.uk/2006/09/17/the-voice-of-experience/>

6 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/i-despise-islamism-ian-mcewan-faces-backlash-over-press-interview-852030.html>

McEwan is careful to attack only what he calls "Islamism" – an ambiguous and poorly defined term often used by critics of Islam to attack those aspects of the religion they do not like. The Conservative Party leader David Cameron has noted that those who use this term are guilty of a "lazy use of language".⁷ McEwan's readiness to come to the defence of his fellow novelist after such a venomous and inflammatory remark is very striking here. It is hard to imagine McEwan defending Amis against all-comers had he made similar remarks, say, about the generality of Irish people at the height of the Troubles in the 1980s.

The Amis/McEwan episode shows the power of Islamophobia to unite public culture at every level. It is not just confined to so-called tabloid newspapers. It is to be found in the broadsheets as well. While we were researching this pamphlet an extraordinary example of Islamophobia appeared in the *Independent*. The conservative columnist and thinker Bruce Anderson wrote, "There are widespread fears that Muslim immigrants, reinforced by political pressure and, ultimately, by terrorism, will succeed where Islamic armies failed and change irrevocably the character of European civilisation."

Some might well argue that such an achievement might be no bad thing – it is worth recalling that Mahatma Gandhi, when asked what he thought of Western civilisation, replied that he thought it would be a very good idea. Anderson, however, was in no doubt that European civilisation was fighting a remorseless war against Islam. The headline of his article could not have been

7 "What I learnt from my stay with a Muslim family," *Observer*, 13 May 2007 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/story/0,,2078471,00.html>

more straightforward. It read: "We are destroying the very values which could save us in our battle against Islam".⁸ Anderson was gloomy about the outcome, warning that the fight against Islam was tougher than the fight against Soviet Russia in the Cold War. "Then, the enemy had a name, a capability, an order of battle. We had insights into his intentions, diplomatic means of mitigation, geopolitical concepts. Now, we do not even have a map of our ignorance. We are blundering in the dark, wrestling with unknown unknowns." Yet Anderson did not altogether despair, noting that "Europe has immense strengths. The resources of civilisation are not exhausted."

The implicit analysis contained in this article could not be clearer. Civilised Europe was engaged in a life and death battle with barbarous Islam. At the vanguard of this assault were "Muslim immigrants". This kind of writing amounts to a gross distortion. There is, of course, no question at all that Britain and many other countries find ourselves in a battle with certain groups of Muslim terrorists. But that is not the same as being in a battle with Islam, and it is morally wrong and intellectually feeble to make that claim.

A sort of collective moral blindness overcomes the British political, media and cultural establishment when columns like this get written. Bruce Anderson is a famous *bête noir* of the politically correct – and yet this rabid and profoundly inflammatory denunciation of Britain's 1.6 million Muslims, with its claim that they were waging war against western civilisation, did not raise an eyebrow. We searched hard – and

8 "We are destroying the very values that could save us in our battle against Islam," *Independent*, 2 June 2008; <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/bruce-anderson/bruce-anderson-we-are-destroying-the-very-values-which-could-save-us-in-our-battle-against-islam-838209.html>

found no criticism at all anywhere in the mainstream British press or media of Bruce Anderson's piece, except for a few angry responses in the *Independent* letters page.

If anything, there was approval. The neoconservative writer Douglas Murray, director of the Centre for Social Cohesion, founded by Civitas, the right-wing think tank, posted a link on its website blog to Anderson's article. He stated, without criticism or further comment, that the piece "nicely summed up" many of "the cogitations of the last three days" of the "Post-Christian Europe and Resurgent Islam" conference in Vienna, the event which had apparently provoked the Anderson polemic.⁹ A link to the article was also posted on the BNP's internet discussion board, introduced with the ironically perplexed line, "Here's a rather strange article from the normally leftist *Independent*"¹⁰

There is a reason for this blindness in the media establishment. The systematic demonisation of Muslims has become a very important part of the central narrative of the British political and media class at the start of the 21st century. Indeed, it has strong historic roots. But it is now so entrenched, so much part of normal discussion, that almost nobody notices. Protests go unheard and unnoticed. All politicians and journalists engaged in mainstream public discourse are taught to be abnormally sensitive about giving offence to minorities of any description. The one glaring exception to this rule is Britain's Muslims.

It is not too hard to speculate on the reason. Britain's Muslim

9 http://www.socialcohesion.co.uk/blog/2008/06/the_pessimism_of_vienna.html

10 <http://www.bnp.org.uk/2008/06/christian-preachers-face-arrest-in-birmingham/>

immigrants are mainly poor, isolated and alienated from mainstream society. Many of them are of a different skin colour. As a community British Muslims are relatively powerless. There are very few Muslim MPs, there has never been a Muslim cabinet minister, no mainstream newspaper is owned by a Muslim and – as far as we are aware – only one newspaper employs a regular Muslim columnist on its comment pages, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown of the *Independent*. Various statistical surveys show that Muslims have the highest rate of unemployment, poorest health, the most disability and fewest educational qualifications of any faith group in the country.¹¹ This means they are very vulnerable indeed, rendering them open to ignorant and hostile commentary from mainstream figures – in particular to ignorant and malicious analysis which conflates the violence of a tiny minority of Muslim terrorists with the British Muslim communities as a whole, or indeed the entire religion of Islam.

The *Guardian* columnist Polly Toynbee has produced some egregious analysis of Islam, and she makes an interesting study. Ms Toynbee is a normally regarded as a model of political correctness, and a champion of the oppressed. When it comes to Islam, however, she suddenly sounds remarkably like Bruce Anderson. Like Anderson she portrays Islam as a bloody and oppressive religion at war with western civilisation. We are emphatically not accusing her of being a racist. Indeed when we interviewed her she took care to inform us of her extensive connections with Muslims, and

11 <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=979>; see also House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, *Terrorism and Community Relations*, HC 165-I, 2004-05, pp.22-24, and Blick, A., et al, *The Rules of the Game: Terrorism, Community and Human Rights*, Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, 2006, ch. 2.

Muslim women in particular. She added that she has adopted a Somali family, not the action of someone with a personal phobia about Muslims.

Venomous though Toynbee can sometimes be about Islam, she is every bit as hostile to Christianity. She is the President of the British Humanist Association and she addresses all religions from an impartial hostile perspective. Some might argue that it is one thing to publish violent diatribes against Christianity, Britain's official religion, in its various manifestations, official and unofficial, to which many citizens at any rate nominally subscribe – and quite another to be quite so disrespectful towards the religion of a small and comparatively vulnerable British minority. This criticism carries extra weight because Islam plays a much more powerful role in shaping the identity of most Muslims than Christianity does in forming the outlook of the majority of British citizens.

However, the far bigger problem with Toynbee's reporting is that she distorts the Islamic faith. Like the Tory commentator Bruce Anderson and many other Islamophobes, she portrays it as bloodthirsty, hate-filled and opposed to civilised values. This distortion can be quite systematic and disturbing, as Polly Toynbee's defence of Islamophobia, published in the *Guardian* shortly after 11 September 2001, shows. In the article Toynbee challenged the proposition that Islam was peaceful and tolerant religion, as the following section shows:

"But the blood-curdling words of the Prophet are there for all to read: 'Kill those who join other gods' (Koran, 6: 5-6). Muslims must 'slay or crucify or cut the hands and feet of the

unbeliever' (5:34). 'From them [the unbelievers] garments of fire shall be cut and there shall be poured over their head a boiling water whereby whatever is in their bowels and skin shall be dissolved and they will be punished with hooked iron rods' (22:19-22). The Prophet commands for any unbeliever, 'Seize ye him and bind ye him, And burn ye him in the Blazing Fire. Further make him march in a chain whereof the length is seventy cubits... Nor hath he any food except the corruption from the washing of wounds'. There is much more, with smiting above necks and smiting all fingertips off. It is notable that his early words of tolerance spring from when he was weak, while the murderous talk comes from his later all-conquering days. As for women's rights, slave-maids are the spoils of war, just as scores of celestial virgins are the reward for martyrs. Husbands have the right to scourge disobedient wives, women's evidence is inadmissible in court – all this jars with the hundreds of emails I had explaining how well Islam respects women.¹²

There are all kinds of problems with this analysis. Toynbee's use of verses taken from the Koran is disingenuous and partial. She refers to Chapter 5, verse 34, saying Muslims must "crucify or cut the hands and feet of the unbeliever" but omits to mention that this is in the context of a defensive war launched against Muslims by non-Muslims. She refers to Chapter 22, verses 19-22 – the section dealing with "garments of fire" – without informing the reader that this

¹² "Last Chance to Speak Out," *Guardian*, 5 October 2001 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2001/oct/05/afghanistan.terrorism>

is a description of Hell and of punishment for sinners in the After Life, and by no means dissimilar to other religions' standard descriptions of Hell. It has nothing to do with how Muslims treat non-Muslims in this world, in this life.

She refers to a Prophetic (actually Koranic) instruction: "Seize ye him and bind him" which again refers to the punishment for the unbelievers and sinners in the fire of Hell, in the After Life, and has no worldly or earthly relevance to Muslim/non-Muslim relations.

As for her quotation, "Kill those who join other gods", this verse does not appear in Chapter 6, verses 5 and 6, as Toynbee claims, but in Chapter 9. Crucially, it is truncated: the verse emphatically doesn't mean Muslims should go out willy-nilly and kill non-believers in the middle of the High Street. It is in fact part of a historically specific group of verses that refers to a period when certain pagan tribes in Arabia reneged on their peace treaty with the early Muslims and the Koran then gave permission to the Muslims to fight them. It is in the midst of this group of verses that "Kill those who join other Gods" and so on appears (i.e. "those who join other Gods" being that specific group of non-Muslims who had betrayed the Muslims and their treaty). The group of verses ends with an injunction to "leave them free" if they repent and, "If they ask for asylum... grant them". Toynbee misses all this out and therefore gives a totally inverted and erroneous impression.

It is also worth stressing that nowhere in her article does Toynbee make any mention of the countless verses in the Koran calling for peace and tolerance: e.g. Chapter 2: 256: "Let there be no compulsion in religion" and

Chapter 2:190: "Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for Allah loveth not transgressors".

When we asked Toynbee how she had come by these quotes she said that she did not know, a reasonable reply since the article was penned more than six years ago. Wherever she happened to obtain her quotes from the Koran, similar truncated quotes can be found on a crude, anti-Muslim website (see <http://www.flex.com/~jai/satyamevajayate/hell.html>). There is also circumstantial evidence that this website has also been filleted by the British National Party; and similar quotes from the Koran have also been used in BNP campaigning. It is intriguing how, from different ends of the spectrum, both critics of Islam such as Bruce Anderson and Polly Toynbee, and Muslim supporters of terrorism like Osama Bin Laden, interpret the Koran so violently. Mainstream Muslims choose not to. It is an interesting and instructive paradox that commentators such as Anderson and Toynbee share the same warped interpretation of a great religion as the violent extremists they denounce.

When we put these distorted quotes to Toynbee, she said very much to her credit that she would not write the same article again. She remarked, very reasonably, that we have all learnt a great deal since 9/11. Furthermore we have not been able to find similar distortions of Islam in more recent articles by the *Guardian* commentator. However as this pamphlet went to press Toynbee's original piece, with its disturbingly unfair interpretation of the Koran, remained unamended on the *Guardian* website.¹³

Islamophobia is a tremendous force for unification in British

¹³ *ibid.*

public culture. It does not merely bring liberal progressives like Polly Toynbee together with curmudgeonly Tory commentators like Bruce Anderson. It also enlists militant atheists with Christian believers. While we were researching this pamphlet a blistering attack on alleged British government complicity in the rise of British Islam appeared in the *Church of England Newspaper*. The article stated that:

“A Muslim Home Office adviser, for example, was responsible for Baroness Scotland’s aborting of the legislation against honour killings, arguing that informal methods would be better. In the police we hear of girls under police protection having the addresses of their safe houses disclosed to their parents by Muslim officers who think they are doing their religious duty. While men-only gentlemen’s clubs are now being dubbed unlawful, we hear of municipal swimming baths encouraging ‘Muslim women only’ sessions and in Dewsbury hospitals staff waste time by turning beds to face Mecca five times a day – a Monty Pythonesque scenario of lunacy, but astonishingly true. Prisons are replete with imams who are keen to inculcate conservative Islam in any inmates who are deemed to be culturally ‘Muslim’: the Prison Service in effect treats such prisoners as a cultural block to be preached to by imams at will.¹⁴ (In fact, the hospital story is astonishingly untrue; see Chapter 3.)

What is fascinating about this article is the absence of any evidence of any kind for its allegations about Muslim

influence. The *Church of England Newspaper* felt free casually to smear Muslims with charges that are simply not true. The same caution applies to the recent fear-mongering about Muslims by the Bishop of Rochester, Michael Nazir-Ali. In a comment article in the *Telegraph* he failed to cite a single specific example to support his allegation that Muslim “no-go” areas existed in Britain, while making sweeping assertions about Islamic extremism.¹⁵

This shows once again that it is possible to assert write anything one wishes about Islam, and about British Muslims.

¹⁴ *Church of England Newspaper*, 23 May 2008; <http://www.churchnewspaper.com>

¹⁵ *Daily Telegraph*, 11 January 2008; <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1574695/Extremism-flourished-as-UK-lost-Christianity.html>

Chapter Three

HOW MUSLIMS SPREAD DISEASE, BAN CHRISTMAS AND OTHER FABRICATED STORIES

We wanted to find out for sure whether the kind of anti-Muslim commentary described in the chapter above was typical. So Channel 4 Dispatches commissioned the Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, famous for the rigour and astringency of its media analysis, to examine reporting of Muslim issues. A team of three academics and eight students worked on a unique study of coverage of Islam over eight years from 2000. The team analysed some 974 stories in all. The full report, along with details of the methodologies and procedures, can be found on the Channel Four website.

The Cardiff team found that approximately two thirds of all “news hooks” for stories about Muslims involved either terrorism (some 36 per cent of stories); religious issues such as Sharia Law, highlighting cultural differences between British Muslims and others (22 per cent); or Muslim extremism, concerning figures like Abu Hamsa, for example. These stories all portrayed Muslims as a source of trouble. By contrast only 5 per cent of stories were based on problems *facing* British Muslims.

According to the Cardiff team “four of the most common discourses about Muslims in Britain associate Islam/Muslims

with threats, problems or in opposition to dominant British values. By contrast, we found that only 2 per cent of stories contained the proposition that Muslims supported dominant moral values.” There were very few cheerful stories about Muslims. By contrast one quarter of all stories about Islam view it as “dangerous, backward or irrational” with a further quarter seeing Islam as part of a clash with the west. Almost half of descriptive nouns used for Muslims by the media boil down either to “terrorist” or “extremist”.

There are obviously some understandable reasons for some of these negative stories. Each specific piece of coverage may even have been justified – though we doubt it. However it is worthwhile pausing to consider the cumulative effects this barrage of negativity must have on Muslims in Britain. Muslims – as with anybody who finds themselves described in such a relentlessly dismal light – can only feel unwanted and cast out. Those who are not Muslims, by contrast, are bound to feel alarm and hostility. This almost entirely unrelieved kind of media coverage can only increase hatred and resentment.

This is the disturbing background to the culture of mendacity we discovered as we made our own scrutiny of media reports about Muslims. When we investigated them, they would

often – though not always – turn out not to be true. One example – this one has entered British folklore – is the story that Muslims want to ban our Christmas celebrations. This story appears from time to time in the British press, and when we investigated it turned out to be a fabrication.

On 2 November 2005 the *Daily Express* splashed its front page on the story, "Christmas is banned: it offends Muslims".¹ The story reported that Lambeth council had re-labelled its "Christmas lights" as "celebrity lights" or as "winter lights". This seemed the ultimate proof that Muslims were undermining the British way of life and attacking our most sacred traditions, as the first paragraph of the *Express* story made clear. It read: "Britain's proud heritage suffered a devastating blow yesterday after council chiefs banned Christmas." The article went on to carry a chorus of denunciation, including from a Church of England spokesman, Steve Jenkins, who was quoted as saying: "I thought we were over all this stuff. I thought people had stopped this". Jenkins added: "We would not call Diwali lights celebrity lights would we?"

But one thing seemed suspicious about the *Express* front page. Besides the stark, attention-seeking headline, there was no evidence at all the Muslims had had anything to do with the decision by Lambeth council to change the name of its Christmas lights. When we investigated the story we found there was a very good reason for this: they didn't. We discovered that the front page splash was based on a report by journalist Greg Truscott of the South London Press that Lambeth council had dropped references to Christmas. This carefully written and researched story, printed on

page five, made no mention at all of Muslims. When we interviewed Truscott, he told us that his story had been traded on to the *Express* by a local stringer who specialised in selling on local stories. He added that he was shocked about the way his story had been twisted and taken out of context.

In short, the same ugly process was at work that created the false "Hounded Out" front page in the *Sun*. A carefully written story deep in a local paper was catapulted onto the front page of a tabloid through the easy expedient of adding the word Muslim to the headline. Lambeth council said that the entire story, not merely the Muslim involvement but also the claim that Christmas had been banned, was deeply misleading: "Christmas was going on as usual, the Christmas tree was up in the town hall, the usual Christmas carols were being sung, the lights were up. The different names really were born out of inconsistency, they were never the official council policy, yet it escalated into this huge story."²

Here are some more false stories concerning Muslims in Britain. Some were pure inventions, others contained a grain of truth but were distorted.

“MUSLIM SICKOS' MADDIE KIDNAP SHOCK

– Daily Star, 28 April 2008

The story did not, as readers might have inferred from the front-page headline, reveal that Madeleine McCann had been kidnapped by a Muslim "sicko". In fact, it refers to a website on which claims were made that Madeleine's parents were involved in her disappearance. The website apparently claimed that "SICKENING claims which blame the McCanns for the disappearance of their daughter

Madeleine have been made by Muslim fanatics in internet rants." What is so striking about this *Daily Star* story is the way that a Heath Robinson contrivance was found which added Muslims to the Madeleine McCann tragedy, thereby confecting a misleading and inflammatory front-page splash.

“HOGWASH: Now the PC brigade bans piggy banks in case they offend Muslims

– Daily Express, 24 October 2005

The story claimed that NatWest and Halifax had removed images of piggy banks from their promotional material in an effort to avoid offending Muslim customers, since pork is forbidden in Islam. The paper quoted observers calling such action "barmy" and "bonkers", thereby stirring up a huge response from the public. One letter to the paper was entitled "Piggy bank climb-down is victory for the terrorists". NatWest was originally called by journalists from the *Lancashire Evening Telegraph* who were told in no uncertain terms that the end of one promotion had nothing to do with fear of causing offence. The *Express* then ran the story without making reasonable checks with the banks.³ The article manages to cite no evidence that piggy banks had been removed for the reason cited in the inflammatory headline, confining itself to expressing outrage from MPs and church leaders.

The banks themselves soon cleared up the matter. The Halifax drily noted that it "has not withdrawn any piggy banks from branches" and noted that in fact it had not used piggy banks in its branches for a number of years.⁴ The NatWest press statement noted that: "There is absolutely

2 Statement given to Search for Common Ground by Lambeth Council, 2007 p.39 http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor/equalities/docs/commonground_report.pdf

3 *ibid.*

4 26 October 2005 <http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/img/2005/ep35/halifax.pdf>

1 *Daily Express*, 2 November 2005

no fact in the story. We simply had a UK wide savings marketing campaign, which included pictures of piggy banks, running until the end of September. Piggy banks have been and will continue to be used as a promotional item by NatWest.”⁵ That is indeed the case, as NatWest’s piggy banks feature prominently in their promotions to this day.

“Get off my bus I need to pray

– *The Sun*, 28 March 2008

This was the story of a Muslim bus driver ordering his passengers off his bus so that he could pray. The *Sun* story, along with footage of the bus driver praying, was widely circulated around right-wing blogs. Dhimmi Watch, the right-wing blog on the site Jihad Watch that catalogues perceived outrages committed by Muslims, even included the *Sun* story in their “ever-expanding You Can’t Make This Stuff Up file”.

Well, actually you can. For the *Sun* it was apparently a perfect example of a Muslim putting his faith before the interests of the public and demanding special treatment. The newspaper ran the story after giving London United Bus Company very little time to investigate, obliging them to issue a holding statement saying they would look into the matter. Once they had done so it was clear that the story was rather different. The bus had been delayed, so in order to maintain frequency the bus company had ordered the driver to stop his bus and allow passengers to board the bus behind. Tickets and CCTV evidence show that all the passengers were on that bus within a minute. The driver was under strict instructions not to allow any passengers onto his bus. He was on a ten-minute break so could do what he wanted.

5 28 October 2005 <http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/img/2005/ep35/natwest.pdf>

The so-called witness, a 21 year old plumber, who recorded the bus driver praying, had not in fact been on the bus, and had arrived after the incident to find a small crowd waiting outside a bus. Jumping to a false conclusion, he sold his story to the *Sun*. The bus driver is currently taking legal action against the *Sun* for defamation and gross invasion of privacy. The article has been removed from the *Sun*’s website.

“Nurses Told to Turn Muslims’ Beds to Mecca

– *Daily Express*, 4 December 2007

This story claimed that “NURSES have been told to stop treating patients while they move Muslims’ beds FIVE TIMES a day to face Mecca.” We discovered that in reality nurses would only move terminally-ill Muslim patients’ beds at their family’s request. The concession did not apply to all Muslim patients, and certainly not five times a day.

Julia Squire, chief executive of The Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust, which runs Dewsbury and District Hospital, said. “The press reporting on this matter is simply incorrect. Let me be absolutely clear: no employee of The Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust has been or will be ordered to turn hospital beds to face Mecca five times a day.”⁶

The story originated from an anonymous quote from a nurse at the Dewsbury hospital used in the *Daily Express* (and also in a similar account which appeared and in the same day’s *Daily Star*, which is under the same ownership). According to the anonymous source, “If we are having to turn dozens of beds to face Mecca five times a day, plus provide running water for them to wash before and after prayers, it is bound to impact on the essential medical service

6 “Papers criticised over Mecca beds,” *Spenborough Today*, 7 December 2007

we are supposed to be providing.”

⁷ Other news papers had run the story correctly, reporting that it would only happen to “very ill” patients and even then not five times a day.⁸

Fascinatingly, even newspapers which had got the story right, like the *Daily Mirror*, then inserted the five times a day claim,⁹ giving it a much more prominent billing. The *Daily Telegraph* even went to the lengths of borrowing the anonymous quote in the following day’s paper (6 December 2007).¹⁰ The story then gained momentum as angry letters poured in and MPs voiced their outrage, prompting the *Daily Star* to glory in its investigative journalism, boasting “OUR revelation that nurses are having to turn Muslim patients’ beds to face Mecca has prompted a furious response from Brits. In the biggest response the *Daily Star* has ever had to a story, thousands of angry readers swamped our offices with texts, phone calls and e-mails”.¹¹

The incident has now since entered folklore, becoming a central piece of evidence for those who make the case that Muslims are invading the British way of life. When the *Daily Star* finally quoted the NHS denials, they were presented as a U-turn rather than a mistake on the part of the newspapers.¹²

“Muslim’s hospital bug snub

– *The Sun*, 4 February 2008

From the rumours of Jews poisoning the wells during the

7 “Nurses Told to Turn Muslims’ Beds to Mecca,” *Daily Express*, 4 December 2007,

8 “Patients Beds Turn to Mecca,” *Daily Mirror*, 5 December 2007; “Patients to Face Mecca,” *Sun*, 5 December 2007

9 “Not paid to be Angels,” *Daily Mirror*, 6 December 2007

10 “Nurses must turn beds five times a day to face Mecca,” *Daily Telegraph*, 6 December 2007,

11 Plans Got us Write Angry *Daily Star*, 5 December 2007,

12 “U-TURN OVER NHS MUSLIM PRAYER BEDS,” *Daily Star*, 6 December 2007.

Black Death in the fourteenth century to scare stories of homosexual men spreading HIV in the 1980s the pattern of aliens spreading disease is part of a long tradition. Now the same kind of accusations are being flung at Muslims.

Last October *The Times* claimed that Muslim medical students “are refusing to attend lectures or answer exam questions on alcohol-related or sexually transmitted diseases because they claim it offends their religious beliefs.”¹³ This story stemmed from a British Medical Association statement warning the General Medical Council not to relax the rules about opting out of parts of the course. When we approached the BMA, they told us the statement was based on anecdotal evidence from one source, which they refused to reveal.

A much more serious case came in February this year when the *Sun* dramatically warned that “thousands of hospital patients are in danger of catching deadly superbugs because Muslim medical students refuse to follow new hygiene rules.”¹⁴ The message from this *Sun* report was very serious indeed – that thousands of patients who were attended by Muslim students risked catching a fatal disease as a result. The first piece of hard evidence in the story came in the fifth paragraph, which stated that female students at Leicester University “had difficulty” complying with a Department of Health directive that medical staff across the country should be “bare below the elbow” to stop infection.

We visited Leicester to determine whether Muslim students were in fact refusing to wash their hands and putting

patients' lives at risk. Not a single doctor or member of staff we spoke to had come across any problems with hand-washing. Dr Paul Symonds, Reader and Consultant Clinical Oncologist at Leicester University, told us: “I personally haven't seen it. I know of no-one who says they've seen it, and I've discussed it with our junior staff, nurses, colleagues, and everyone just looks blankly at me with blank incomprehension, what are you talking about? ... the issue has not arisen.”¹⁵

We followed Muslim medical students on their ward rounds. They were shocked by the stories in the press. Nabila Khan, a fourth year medical student, said, “It's completely outrageous. It's not based on any facts. I don't know where they got this information from. As a medical student myself I always roll up my sleeves, and everyone that I know does. We've had no complaints, no-one's ever said anything to me in the past about it, so I find it ridiculous that all this stuff has been written in newspapers and things, and people have printed these stories without checking them out first.”¹⁶ Ather Mirza, Leicester University's press officer, told us that they were not even aware of the story until it was splashed across the world's media. He told us that after an investigation it emerged that “one student had asked a question about what the regulations were, she'd not objected to them, she just asked about them, this had got recorded and had spiralled in to a story about Muslim students being unhappy about the whole procedure. Well, that wasn't the case at all.”¹⁷

As with many stories of this kind, there was a grain of truth.

Some female Muslim students had indeed expressed reservations about the newly introduced Department of Health guidance, which stipulated that all doctors must be “bare below the elbow” – a phenomenon thrown up by a Freedom of Information Act request by the *Sunday Telegraph* journalist Julie Henry.¹⁸ But the highly inflammatory and insulting claim that Muslim students were putting thousands of patients' lives at risk because they put their religious beliefs before patients' safety was simply not backed up by the evidence.

“The crescent and the canteen
– *The Economist*, 19 October 2006

This was not the first time that Leicester had been the subject of distorted stories. In October 2006 *The Economist* reported, “Last November students at Leicester University persuaded their union cafeteria to ban pork and go exclusively halal.” This article then generated rumours online that Leicester University had banned pork from campus. On a BBC forum, Leicester was even dubbed “Sharia University” (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/mbreligion/F2213236?thread=3606712>). The *Yorkshire Post* later ran a story, “Extremists allowed to fan flames of hatred”, which attributed the ban to domineering Muslim extremists (17 September 2007).¹⁹

There was no truth in the rumour that Leicester had banned pork on campus. In actual fact, the university Student Union had made just one out of the numerous cafes on campus halal, in a decision which had as much to do with economic factors as cultural sensitivity as Leicester has a large number of Muslim students. The

13 “Muslim Medical Students Get Picky,” *The Times*, 7 October 2007

14 “Muslim's hospital bug snub,” *Sun*, 4 February 2008

15 Interview 20 May 2008

16 Interview 20 May 2008

17 Interview 19 May 2008

18 “Muslim medics break superbug hygiene rules,” *Sunday Telegraph*, 3 February 2008

19 Bernard Dineen, *Yorkshire Post*, 17 September 2007

other 26 cafes on the campus, including the main canteen, were still serving pork as usual.

Allegation of Forged Evidence

As we have seen the culture of deceit, distortion and fabrication on Muslim issues stretches way beyond the tabloid press. An allegation of falsified or deficient research has also been made against a Policy Exchange report, *The Hijacking of British Islam*, published in October 2007.

This report – from one of Britain's most respected think tanks with extremely close links to the Conservative Party – made the claim that extremist literature containing anti-semitic and homophobic passages, and calling for the beheading of Muslims who abandon Islam, was available at a quarter of the 100 mosques visited by researchers working for Policy Exchange around Britain. This splashed all across the newspapers (see for example, *The Times*, "Lessons in hate found at leading mosques"; the *Sun*, "Extremist mosque warning"; *Daily Mail*, "Agenda of hate in UK mosques"; *Daily Telegraph*, "Many mosques 'continuing to spread messages of hate'", all 30 October 2007).

Last December, BBC's *Newsnight*, who had been given exclusive access to the report, stated that some of the evidence presented to them by Policy Exchange was forged. The *Newsnight* team had found suspicious inconsistencies in receipts allegedly obtained from North London Central Mosque, Euston Mosque, Leyton Mosque in London and the Muslim Education Centre in High Wycombe. Forensic evidence suggested that at least one receipt had been forged and that two other receipts – supposedly from different mosques – were in fact written by the same hand.

There were basic mistakes in the addresses printed on three receipts, while all of the receipts under suspicion had been printed on home-style ink jet printers.

When *Newsnight* ran the report about the forged documents on 12 December, it provoked fury from Policy Exchange. Charles Moore, chairman of Policy Exchange, mocked *Newsnight* for their "obsession about a few pieces of paper." accusing Peter Barron, *Newsnight's* editor, of a serious error of judgment.²⁰ In a letter to the BBC, Policy Exchange threatened to take legal action "relentlessly, to trial or capitulation". On 19 December Policy Exchange issued a statement saying that they took the allegations seriously, and insisted that their "investigations must be allowed time to proceed." Six months on *Newsnight* contacted Policy Exchange to enquire as to the progress of the investigation and received a response saying that it had been "adjourned" because of fears for the safety of the researchers who had gone into hiding.²¹

The Policy Exchange cannot be criticised for carrying out its investigation. The publication of literature, by Muslims or by anybody else, fanning homophobia, anti-Semitism or violence is always repugnant and cries out to be exposed. However, if the *Newsnight* claims are true, then the readiness to make assertions based on fabricated or misleading evidence fits into a pattern of deception and what can generously be described as lazy reporting of Muslims from mainstream news organizations in Britain. The use of forged evidence to discredit Muslim institutions is

not merely disreputable: it forms part of a much wider pattern of media disinformation. It is now time to turn to an investigation of the consequences of this damaging public discourse.

²⁰ "Newsnight told a small story over a big one," *Daily Telegraph*, 15 December 2007, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/main.jhtml?xml=/opinion/2007/12/15/do1501.xml>

²¹ http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/newsnight/2008/05/policy_exchange_dispute_update.html

Chapter Four

HOW THE FAR RIGHT TURNED TO TARGET ISLAM

The incessant media campaign of vilification against Muslims has an uncannily accurate echo on the streets of Britain's towns and cities. As we researched the Channel Four Dispatches film we discovered the language of Islamophobic columnists duplicated by the British National Party and its growing band of supporters.

We made a very startling discovery: in Britain the far right has changed direction. The British National Party has in recent years come to realise that anti-semitism and anti-black campaigning just won't work if they are serious about electoral success. If they are to make the move to mainstream respectability, they need an issue that allows them to exploit people's fears about immigrants and Britain's ethnic minority communities without being branded racist extremists.

They have found that issue. Since 9/11 and particularly 7/7, the BNP has gone all out to tap into a rich vein of anti-Muslim sentiment.

The party's leader, Nick Griffin, has described Islam as a "wicked, vicious faith"²² and has sought to distance himself and the party from its anti-semitic past. Party members are now rebuked for discussing the Holocaust.²³

22 In court, 25 January 2006; <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1508787/Islam-is-a-wicked,-vicious-faith,-BNP-leader-tells-court.html>

23 In April 2003, the BNP officially reprimanded a candidate in Stoke, Steven Batkin, after he questioned the Holocaust, *Stoke Sentinel*, 24 September 2003

Instead, they are more likely to focus on terrorism,²⁴ the evils of Islam, and scare stories of Britain becoming an Islamic state.²⁵ Griffin's strategy has been inspired by the press, as he himself has admitted. He is on record as saying:

"We bang on about Islam. Why? Because to the ordinary public out there it's the thing they can understand. It's the thing the newspaper editors sell newspapers with. If we were to attack some other ethnic group — some people say we should attack the Jews ... But ... we've got to get to power. And if that was an issue we chose to bang on about when the press don't talk about it ... the public would just think we were barking mad."²⁶

We saw this deeply cynical strategy in action last month when we visited Stoke on Trent.

The BNP's Campaign in Stoke

Stoke is one of the heartlands of BNP support. With nine BNP councillors, the council is second only to Barking and Dagenham in far-right representation. Labour's support in the area is quickly being eroded. At the time of the 1997 general election all 60 local councillors were Labour. This

24 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4674675.stm

25 The BNP called for the May 2006 elections to be a "Referendum on Islam"; <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/bnp-to-use-prophet-cartoon-in-campaign-467359.html>

26 <http://video.google.co.uk/videoplay?docid=1269630805284168668>

figure now stands at 16. In the May elections Labour polled 14,000 votes in 20 seats; the BNP polled almost 8,000 standing in just 10 seats. There is serious talk of the next mayor of Stoke coming from the BNP and senior figures within the party tell us they expect to have an MEP after the European elections next year.

The party has made this progress in large part by fighting a vicious anti-Muslim campaign. Stoke has one of the lowest employment rates in the country since the pottery industry collapsed. The BNP have sought to link this decline to Muslim immigration. Their leaflets have shown a montage of pottery kilns, smiling white housewives and a church tower, with the caption, "HANLEY 70 YEARS AGO". A second montage alongside showed silhouettes of mosques and a photograph of women in veils (taken in Birmingham) – one giving a V-sign – with the caption, "Is this what you want for our city centre?"

Other campaigns have focused on planning issues over mosques – a flash point elsewhere too. The BNP accuse the Labour council of cutting special deals with Muslim groups in exchange for support. The BNP protested that the Labour majority council was renting a plot of land to Muslim developers for just £1 a year, amid suggestions that it could be sold to them for £72,000. The BNP even made an offer of £100,000 on the land. The mayor of Stoke, Mark Meredith, told us that these peppercorn rent deals are done with all community groups, and that in this case a plot of land that has been lying idle for decades will be put to good use and regenerate the area.²⁷

The determination to scapegoat Muslims has meant they even champion animal

rights, targeting halal food as inhumane in a campaign that BNP Councillor Michael Coleman admitted to us was not their natural territory.

The BNP told us on our recent visit that they are about to launch a new nationwide anti-Muslim campaign from Stoke. The launch pad for this new era of hostility will be the sentencing of Habib Khan, who was charged with murdering his neighbour, Keith Brown, a BNP activist. Brown is to be promoted as the first "BNP martyr."

We researched this sad story. The bare facts are these. On 6 July last year Habib Khan, an elder at the local mosque, stabbed Keith Brown in a scuffle outside his house in Normacot, Stoke. Brown had Khan's son in a headlock, and, according to the defence, Brown threatened to kill him. Khan's defence was that he had run out of the kitchen holding a knife, which he held against Brown's back; and that Brown then fell onto it, and later died.

The Khan and Brown families both tell of a campaign of hatred and abuse from the other side. Indeed both have CCTV records of attacks. The BNP are now presenting this case not only as an example of Muslim aggression, but of an unjust system, biased in favour of Muslims. Khan was found not guilty on the charge of murder, but he was convicted of manslaughter. The BNP argue that if Brown had killed Khan it would have been treated as a racial murder. They also claim the police did not take seriously Brown's appeals for help in the past.

We discovered that the two men were once friends and colleagues. In fact, Khan approached Brown in 2001 saying he wanted to move in next door and Brown passed on the details to the owner. The dispute started

as Khan wanted to expand his property. This soon flared up into violent rows. Keith Brown had a history of violence and in 2001 was convicted of punching a man in the face. The Khans, in statements made to the police, claimed they were called "Pakis" by the Browns and that their windows were smashed every other day. They also allege that they were subjected to death threats. Khan told the court, "The past four years I've been living in hell."

The issue is perfect for the BNP's agenda. In their eyes it highlights Muslim aggression and a system biased against whites. After the verdict was given BNP Councillor Michael Coleman stood outside the court and said, "Anyone who gets angry – get involved with the BNP."

A Racist Incident in Windsor

We are not arguing for special treatment for Muslims. If a Muslim commits a crime he or she should be accountable to the same laws as everyone else. If there is even a perception of leniency or favouritism, it adds to the antagonism towards Muslims. We learnt this at first hand when we travelled to Windsor to investigate the so-called "race riots" in Windsor in October 2006.

The problem originated in the purchase by Sardar Hussain of a dairy in Dedworth, a predominantly white working class suburb of Windsor. The previous owner had been Express Dairies. Hussain changed the name to Medina Dairies and, according to locals, rapidly expanded it into a 24-hour a day operation. This caused residents great disturbance. Hussain employed a large Muslim work force and used one building as an unofficial "prayer room".

In the months leading up to

27 Interview 2 June 2008

the riots, tension had reached new levels as the dairy had an application for an Islamic "education centre" turned down by Windsor council. This was perceived as a mosque by another name, and local people feared it would bring Muslims into a predominantly white area. Hussain had appealed the decision much to locals' irritation. They feared that government intervention would grant Hussain permission (as a planning inspector did the following month).

At around nine on the evening of 2 October 2006, Sean Hayes, aged 16, and a friend were involved in a disturbance outside the "prayer room" by the Medina Dairy. This was the latest in a series of episodes involving white youths, apparently intent on provoking Muslim men at prayer. According to Sean's mother Karen Hayes, who arrived at the scene to help her son, 20 men from the prayer room, carrying make-shift weapons and dressed in white robes, attacked her. As they ran back to the car, she says that she was hit with a piece of lead piping leaving her legs badly bruised, while her daughter was pinned against the car with a garden fork to her throat. The car windows were smashed as men jumped on top, but Karen and her daughter managed to escape.

News of the incident quickly spread among the youngsters in Dedworth. The next evening around 40 white youths attacked the dairy. Lorry windows were smashed, milk bottles were thrown and fights were breaking out. After 40 minutes the police arrived on the scene, but were able to do little to control the fighting. Local youths told us of frequent scuffles and verbal exchanges with workers at the dairy in the months preceding the disturbances. They

felt the dairy workers had aggressively taken over their patch. Indeed many locals felt the dairy personnel intimidated passers-by, blocked the road and behaved aggressively.

The police quickly flooded the area, and over the next few days made six arrests for possession of offensive weapons and assault as small gangs of white and Asian youths gathered each evening. On the Wednesday evening a local teenager, nicknamed "Scouser", drove past the dairy and threw a makeshift petrol bomb, which failed to explode, but scarred the side of the building. Two more petrol bombs were discovered in nearby back gardens. The press delighted in the story as it occurred just after Jack Straw's comments on the veil and fitted the image of a society on the brink of collapse.

Karen Hayes, who was attacked by men from the prayer centre, makes a very serious accusation against East Berkshire Police. Hayes claims the police made little attempt to gather evidence against her attackers. When she and her daughter returned to the car they found a grease gun in the back seat. This clearly belonged to the dairy and had been used to smash the car window, but had not been taken for finger-printing. She also saw a police officer leaning on the garden fork, which had been used to pin her daughter to the car. The only line-up of suspects happened outside the mosque on the night of the attack, in a situation that could hardly have been more intimidating. Mrs Hayes alleges that the police were deliberately half-hearted in their investigation of the assault on her family, fearful of inflaming the situation. An independent witness, a local journalist, confirmed details of her account.

This approach, according to Karen Hayes, made the situation worse. By downplaying the attack on her family, the police gave the impression that the attacks on the dairy were totally unjustified. Neighbouring Slough, unlike Windsor, has a large Asian population and many young Muslims hearing this came to defend the dairy. The feeling locally was that the police had not properly investigated the incident for fear of damaging relations with the Muslim population. The fact that petrol bomber was prosecuted and convicted, and yet no one was ever convicted of the attack on the Hayes family re-doubled local anger.

Mrs Hayes complained to the police about the lacklustre investigation and received a letter, which we have seen, confirming that what happened to her was a "racist incident".

The BNP arrived on the scene in the days following the incidents at the dairy and were able to exploit the supposed "special treatment" and sense of injustice. They offered Karen Hayes a £1,000 to repair her daughter's car in a blatant attempt to hijack the issue. Mrs Hayes refused as she did not want to be associated with the party. The BNP then put up their first candidate in local elections in Windsor in 2007. Matthew Tait, a rising star in the party, ran in Clewer North, failing to be elected, but beating all three Labour candidates. He has vowed to come back and fight the general election next time round.

We met Matthew Tait, a young, articulate, well-dressed young man, a far cry from the stereotypical BNP member of an earlier era, on our visit to Windsor. He denies the BNP were opportunistically exploiting a sensitive issue, claiming it was legitimate to tap into locals' unhappiness.

He told us: "Our election leaflets weren't inflammatory, they were just saying that something unfair has occurred, local people's views are not being represented by the elected councillors or by the council, or by any – even the local press, so we went along there and we tried to put across what people were telling us."²⁸

This single-issue campaign won the BNP an audience for their more traditional view of Islam. Tait told us, "Islam is not part of our culture, it's something that's alien to us... If you want to be Muslim, then I think you should live in a Muslim country."²⁹

Wherever we have explored tension between Muslims and the local community we tended to discover the BNP was present, fanning discontent. This should come as no surprise. All over Europe parties of the far-right have been dropping their traditional hostility to minorities such as Jews and homosexuals and resorting instead to the politics of Islamophobia. The same trend is at work with Austria's Freedom Party and the French National Front. As Filip Dewinter, leader of the virulently right wing Belgian party Flemish Interest proclaimed, "Islam is now the No 1 enemy not only of Europe, but of the entire free world."³⁰

Chapter Five

PHYSICAL ATTACKS ON MUSLIMS

For many, physical attacks are the manifestation of a growing anti-Muslim sentiment, in part created by the media's assault on Britain's Muslims. An increasing number of Muslims now live in fear. Our team went to visit one man whose life has been turned into a nightmare, Sarfraz Sarwar from Basildon.

Sarwar told us that he had lived in the area for 40 years. Originally from Kenya, he is one of three leaders of Basildon Islamic Centre. His wife, a Muslim convert, works as a matron at an old people's home. They have five daughters and a son. He told us how the problems started after 11 September. Since then, members of the local community regularly suffer verbal abuse, their cars are scratched, beer cans are thrown at them and last year a woman had her hijab torn off.

The first attack on Sarwar's family was in October 2001, when pigs' trotters were left outside the front door, the walls of their house were covered with graffiti and the two front windows were broken. After that incident, the family has experienced many more attacks, including one unsuccessful fire-bomb. More recently, in February 2008, the tyres of Sarwar's new car were slashed. Then in mid-March his windows were again broken.

He has installed CCTV cameras around the house, has

replaced the wooden back door with a steel one, and has made his fences higher. He has 'built a little fortress' for his family.

Local Muslims used the Triangle Community Centre as a mosque for two years. During this time they were constantly harassed and their cars were scratched. There were also at least two arson attempts on the building. In October 2006 the community centre was finally burnt down after firebombs were thrown on the roof. The building was completely gutted. It has been rebuilt, but the Muslim community are too scared to return. Sarwar told us that now the local Muslims pray during the week at different people's houses in order to evade detection and attack.

It is hard to say how typical this kind of harassment has become. But during the time we were researching and planning the film a number of violent incidents occurred. On Wednesday 7 May 2008 in Bolton a group of young people allegedly chased a group of Muslim men shouting racial and religious abuse. A chainsaw was allegedly held to the throat of one man. A 17-year-old girl and a 22-year-old man have been charged with affray and possession of an offensive weapon, and are awaiting trial.

A Methodist chapel being converted into an Asian community centre in Quenchwell, near Carnon Downs, Cornwall, suffered an Islamophobic attack

28 Interview 27 May 2008

29 *ibid.*

30 <http://www.filipdewinter.be/page.php?linkID=385>

in early June. In the wake of a local row about the plans to create an Asian centre at this location urine was found inside a builder's helmet. The words "Fuck off you Asian bastards" were written on a table. On the morning of Monday 2 June a pig's head was found nailed to the door in a clear attempt to offend Muslims. The words "God says fuck off" and a cross were daubed on the door.

On 17 April three men were jailed for three years for a campaign of racial harassment lasting nine months against a Muslim colleague, Amjid Mehmood, who was tied to railings and force-fed bacon, which he cannot eat because of his religious beliefs. His attackers filmed the whole incident on a mobile phone. In total, nine separate incidents of racial harassment occurred over the period. A rucksack with protruding wires was put on his locker and his trousers were set on fire. During the Birmingham riots he was driven to an Afro-Caribbean area and told locals were "coming to get him."

On 10 August 2007, Brian Donegan launched a vicious attack on Sheikh Salamouni, an imam at London's Regent's Park mosque, leaving him with horrific injuries and blind for life. Donegan was found not guilty by reason of insanity in early June.

On 25 June, Martyn Gilleard, of Goole, East Yorkshire, a Nazi sympathiser with ties to far-right groups was jailed for 16 years. Police discovered four home-made nail bombs, as well as bullets, swords, axes and knives in his flat. Gilleard had been preparing himself for a war against Muslims. In a note found at his flat he wrote, "Be under no illusions, we are at war. It's a war we are badly losing. I am sick and tired of hearing nationalists talking of killing

Muslims, blowing up mosques and fighting back only to see these acts of resistance fail. The time has come to stop the talking and start to act." The Gilleard case went all but unreported. Were the other way round and a Muslim had been found with an arsenal of weapons plotting a one-man war, one suspects it would have been a rather bigger story.

Our research indicates that there is little appetite for stories in which Muslims appear as the victims. This means that attacks on Muslims go almost entirely unreported and the communities feel they count for nothing. In not reporting these cases the media is yet again betraying its double standards when it comes to Britain's Muslims.

Chapter Six

CONCLUSIONS

Over the centuries many categories of immigrants and foreigners have been singled out for hatred and opprobrium by mainstream society because they in some way threatened British identity, whether from within or without. At various times these despised categories have included Catholics, Jews, French and Germans. Gays were held to subvert decency and normality until the 1980s, blacks until the 1970s, and Jews for many centuries. Now – as we have shown in this pamphlet – this unenviable outcast role has fallen to Muslims.

We are not arguing, however, for some special treatment for Muslims. We do not believe that Muslims should be exempt from the law of the land or the normal scrutiny that must attach in a democracy to all sections of society. We applaud research – such as the Channel Four Dispatches film, *Undercover Mosque* – which has uncovered virulent anti-Semitism or homophobia being preached in British mosques.

Indeed, we discovered as we travelled round Britain, researching our Dispatches documentary and this report, that it is precisely the perception that Muslims receive special treatment that fuels the most resentment. At Windsor we found the perception that local police had failed to

investigate vigorously what seemed to be a racist attack by Asian youths on local women played a very powerful role in fanning resentment among local residents. And when young Muslim youths arrived in the area, the seeming police failure to investigate a racist crime made that local resentment and anger look unjustified when that was by no means the case.

But by exactly the same token we believe that Muslims should be given the same protection as other minority groups from insults or ignorant abuse. We have shown in this pamphlet that this protection is not available. We have shown that Muslims are fair game in the British media. That can only lead to estrangement and alienation.

There is a paradox at work. Many people we spoke to accused Muslims of arrogance and of refusing to engage in the British way of life. No doubt there was some truth in these criticisms. Yet at the same time media reporting shows a distinct bias that must inevitably influence such perceptions. A poll by the Pew Foundation that found that 81 per cent of Muslims in Britain felt that they were Muslim first, and just 7 per cent British first, received a great deal of publicity. But Tufyal Choudhury, a legal academic who studies social cohesion, points out that other polls contradicting this image of Muslims did not receive the same attention. He cites for example a Sky News poll that

found that 46 per cent of Muslims said British first and Muslim second, 12 per cent Muslim first and British second, and 42 per cent said that they did not differentiate. Choudhury adds that the last option was not on offer in the Pew poll.

Questions in polls that ask Muslims about their feelings of loyalty to the United Kingdom are also often badly framed and misinterpreted. In a YouGov poll in July 2005 and an ICM poll in 2006, nearly half of Muslims said that they felt "very loyal" to Britain and between a third and 42 per cent "fairly loyal", while those who said they did not feel "loyal at all" numbered 10 per cent in the YouGov poll and 2 per cent in the ICM poll.

The BNP plays upon ordinary people's feelings of not being heard by politicians, of being a silent majority. Ordinary Muslim families are virtually a silenced minority. It is about time that we collectively decide to extend to Muslims the rights and respect other citizens enjoy.

We think we should all feel a little bit ashamed about the way we treat Muslims in the media, in our politics, and on our streets. They are our fellow citizens, yet often we barely acknowledge them. We misrepresent them and in certain cases we persecute them. We do not treat Muslims with the tolerance, decency and fairness that we so often like to boast is the British way. We urgently need to change our public culture.

MUSLIMS UNDER SIEGE

**Alienating
Vulnerable
Communities**

