

## Hatred, Hysteria and a Trojan Horse

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On Tuesday 22 July the new secretary of state for education in England, Nicky Morgan, made [a statement in the House of Commons about the Trojan Horse affair in Birmingham schools](#). Earlier the same day a report by Peter Clarke had been laid before the House, and in response to it Morgan made a number of pledges on behalf of the government. Some of these could in principle be beneficial. The basis on which they were made, however, was extremely unsound, for Clarke's report is of very poor quality. So is the report by Ian Kershaw on the same subject which was published a few days earlier. And so is a raft of reports from Ofsted.

Most readers of this article are no doubt familiar, at least broadly, with the affair. Some, however, may have been misinformed and misled by the appallingly partial coverage of it over the last four months in the majority of the UK press. Neither Clarke nor Kershaw refers to the media hysteria, and neither therefore seems to be aware that some of the people who gave evidence to them, perhaps indeed most of the people who gave evidence to them, would have been affected by it. At the very least they could have quoted from [a statement by the Bishop of Birmingham and other local religious leaders](#) which was made shortly after the affair began. 'We are profoundly concerned,' declared the Bishop and other leaders, 'that some of the public media have distorted the discussion on what has become known as Operation Trojan Horse, demonising sections of the community in a completely unacceptable way.' Similarly Nicky Morgan made no reference, when she rose to address the Commons about the Clarke report, to the flagrant inaccuracies and distortions, and the virulent racist and anti-Muslim stereotypes, in much of this summer's press coverage.

'Mr Speaker,' said Morgan, 'we are all in the debt of Peter Clarke for the rigour that he brought to his investigation and for the forensic clarity of his findings. Morgan then immediately proceeded to emphasise the government's view that 'we need to deal with the dangers posed by extremism well before it becomes

violent', adding that 'Peter Clarke's report 'offers us important recommendations to address this challenge in schools'. She did not acknowledge that the government's operational definition of extremism is extraordinarily vague – 'vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs' – and that Clarke's evidence for the existence of such extremism in Birmingham schools is extraordinarily thin.

Morgan's pledges to the Commons included the following:

- The National College for Teaching and Leadership will take the extensive evidence provided by Peter Clarke so that its misconduct panel can consider whether any teachers involved should be barred from the profession.
- Advice to the panel already provides that actions which undermine fundamental British values should be viewed as misconduct. It will be strengthened to make clear that exposing pupils to extremist speakers should be regarded as a failure to protect pupils and promote British values.
- Ofsted will inspect how well all schools are actively promoting fundamental British values through their curriculum. Further guidance will be issued on how to improve the social, moral, spiritual and cultural development of pupils, which is also inspected by Ofsted.
- Ofsted will ensure that all state-funded schools meet the requirement to teach a broad and balanced curriculum.

'Broad and balanced curriculum' ... 'fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs ... 'spiritual, moral, social cultural development': these and similar phrases have been around in the education system for many years, indeed for decades. It is right to re-emphasise them. But to imply, as Morgan does, that commitment to them involves no more than a bit of top-down tweaking – an addition to the Ofsted framework here, a bit of rephrasing in government guidance and advice there – is naïve in the extreme. A much more

rigorous and robust response is required, not least in view of the anti-Muslim hatred and hysteria which the Trojan Horse affair has unleashed.

[A letter published in the Guardian earlier this week](#) said that Clarke's report is not 'forensic', as Nicky Morgan claimed in her House of Commons statement, but 'a biased mix of uncorroborated smear, anecdote, hoax and chatroom gossip'. The report, it said further, 'reflects neoconservative assumptions about the nature of extremism; ignores significant testimony and viewpoints; implies the essential problem in Birmingham is simply the influence of certain individuals; discusses governance but not curriculum; ignores the concerns and perceptions of parents and young people; and is unlikely to bear judicial scrutiny.'

There isn't space here to illustrate or explain these criticisms in forensic depth. Suffice to say that the most elementary principles underlying 'fundamental British values' are ignored. Hearsay is presented as fact. Assertions are made without corroborating evidence. Individuals, organisations and groups are criticised without a shred of evidence and without the elementary courtesy of a right to reply. Allegations from anonymous individuals are cited and repeated but without any attempt to get at whatever truth may lie behind them. Opinions and claims by anonymous individuals are cited but without consideration of the possibility they might be malicious, prejudiced or downright wrong. [Testimony and perceptions that conflict with neoconservative ideology](#) are not even cited let alone respectfully attended to. On the rare occasions that hard evidence is supplied – for example, there are quotations from social media conversations amongst a small group of teachers, and quotations from a fine publication by the Muslim Council of Britain – it is open to a range of different interpretations, and therefore does not persuasively support Clarke's conclusions; on the contrary, some of Clarke's evidence could be considered a refutation or qualification of his arguments.

The malicious hoax letter which set off the Trojan Horse affair claimed there was a plot to run certain Birmingham schools on 'strict Islamic principles'. Clarke quotes this, but does not bother to wonder what Islamic principles might be, and how if at all they might be different from, for example, 'British principles'. But if he had concerned himself with this fundamental question he could have valuably

quoted verbatim from guidance issued in 2007 by the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). The purpose of the guidance was 'to provide background information on relevant Islamic beliefs and practices and values, and to deal with issues arising within schools that are important to, and may be of concern to, Muslim pupils and their parents'. 'We have attempted,' said the authors, 'to cover the issues most commonly raised by pupils, parents, teachers, schools and governors, while taking into account the diversity of belief and practice within the Muslim community'. They were mindful, they emphasised, that the current climate, in which there is much negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims, requires that recognition of Muslim identity 'be given greater priority and impetus, to ensure that Muslim pupils are appropriately accommodated and become an integral part of mainstream school life, and thereby of society as a whole.' MCB's statements of principle included the following:

- 'It is important for educators to appreciate and understand the centrality of knowledge and education in the philosophy of Islam and the substantial Muslim contributions to European and world civilisation. Within the educational context it is important to explore opportunities to emphasise common and shared aspects of Islamic and European civilisations in fields such as religion and culture, and linguistic and intellectual exchanges.'
- 'Schools can play a vital role in facilitating the positive integration of Muslim pupils within the wider community and thereby preventing, or at least beginning the process of tackling, some of the problems of marginalisation. Closer cooperation and working between Muslim communities and schools can create an environment where Muslim children feel more included and valued. The statutory and moral responsibility to develop cohesive future generations must and can be achieved through commitment to change, mutual respect and understanding the beliefs, values and cultures of others.'
- 'The faith of Muslim pupils should be seen as an asset in addressing constructively many of the issues that young people face today, including educational failure, disaffection, drugs, crime and sexually transmitted diseases. Islam is an important reference point for Muslim children, and has an extremely relevant message to convey to Muslims in all spheres of life, and also to contribute to wider society.'

- 'The concept of *haya*, which is defined as 'to encompass notions of modesty, humility, decency and dignity', is a central value in Islam, as in many other faith traditions, and applies to all aspects of human behaviour and conduct. It is important to recognise and appreciate that different faiths and cultures may and often do differ in their demarcation between modesty and immodesty.'
- During Ramadan, Muslims should focus on additional worship and God-consciousness, in order to improve themselves in all aspects of their lives and dealing with others, including their character, respect for others, kindness, forgiveness and avoidance of bad language and poor behaviour.

The moral worldview reflected in these quotations is worthy of respect, even by people who do not share its theological dimensions. But by failing to mention the worldview, Clarke in effect sneers at it. Instead of considering fundamental values his report implies the MCB document is merely concerned with cultural customs and preferences. He implies also that the document is strident and demanding, when in fact it is reasonable, moderate, positive and helpful.

The cumulative effect of Clarke's report is to present the neoconservative and profoundly offensive view that Islam is 'a swamp' in which noisome creatures such as crocodiles and mosquitos thrive and are given nourishment and support. 'Peter' has delivered what his political and media friends hoped and asked for. His report is a grave disservice, however, to very many millions of others.

On 25 July, Channel 4 News reported on [research conducted by Birmingham City University](#) relating to the impact of the Trojan Horse affair. 'Previous studies,' said the research director, 'have shown that British Muslims felt very comfortable with their identity, they felt well integrated and proud to be British citizens. But much of this has been undone by what they feel has been relentless, unfair criticism.' A mother said: 'What's the point of us trying to integrate, every time we do we are somehow told it's not good enough, or we're not getting it right.'

Researchers interviewed parents, teachers, governors and local residents. Some felt that the affair had left them feeling that everyone was looking at them and

pointing at them as they walked down the street. One resident claimed that her neighbours had stopped talking to her as a result, adding: 'In fact we have seen rubbish thrown in our front garden... We have all been labelled extremists and radicals.' A huge concern was the impact of these labels on children. 'What happens when they go for a job, or try to get work experience, and employers read that they're from one of these so-called extremist schools?' asked a teacher.

Such research is a powerful reminder that much rebuilding and restorative work remains to be done. Political leaders such as Nicky Morgan have key roles in the urgent process of restoration and support for curriculum renewal, for example a curriculum which truly reflects and promotes fundamental values. It will not be helped, and in certain respects it will be actually hindered, by the official reports of Clarke, Kershaw and Ofsted. It will, though, be helped by the strength and goodwill of people in Birmingham itself.

Source: article by Robin Richardson for the Institute of Race Relations, <https://irr.org.uk/article/hatred-hysteria-and-a-trojan-horse/>