

Hatred, hysteria and a Trojan Horse

July 31, 2014 — Comment



Written by Robin Richardson

A leading educationalist argues that the report by Peter Clarke into the ‘Trojan Horse’ affair, embraced by the new education secretary, is in fact a grave disservice.

On Tuesday 22 July 2014 the new Secretary of State for Education in the UK, 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, 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 on the subject from Ofsted.

Most readers of this article will no doubt be 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 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. And we are in the debt of my predecessor [Michael Gove], now the chief whip on this side of the House, for his determination in the face of criticism to invite Peter to take on this task.’ The reference to ‘Peter’ implied a close – even cosy – personal friendship between the ministers and the person appointed to report to them, and inevitably raised doubts about Clarke’s professionalism, independence, seriousness and objectivity. 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 the 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 explain these criticisms in 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. 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 (MCB) – 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 consider 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 MCB, ‘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 parents 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 emphasised that the current climate, in which there is much negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims, required 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 quotes is worthy of respect, even by people who do not share its theological dimensions. But by failing to mention the worldview, Clarke in effect undermines 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. They will not be helped, and in certain respects they will be hindered, by the official reports of Clarke, Kershaw and Ofsted. They will, though, be helped by the strength and goodwill of people in Birmingham itself.

Related links

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Robin Richardson is a former director of the Runnymede Trust, and the manager of the [Insted website](#) on equality and diversity in education.

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Comments

August 1, 2014

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[...] partial coverage of it over the last four months in the majority of the UK press," leading educationalist Robin Richardson argues that the report by Peter Clarke into the 'Trojan Horse' affair, embraced by the new [...]

August 1, 2014

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[...] There is further brief comment on Clarke's report in this week's newsletter from the Institute of Race Relations – <http://www.irr.org.uk/news/hatred-hysteria-and-a-trojan-horse/> [...]

August 2, 2014

Dr Muhammad Bari:

Without a forensic examination of the origin of a so-called 'Trojan Horse' letter and handling it sensitively for the interest of children's education, Michael Gove invited the former security expert with little educational expertise. The outcome of Peter Clarke's report, as feared by many serious observers, is biased against the Muslim community. In the political climate of an 'open season' to castigate Muslims disproportionately on any issue some think DfE has used a 'sledgehammer to crack a nut', while many others see this as politicisation of the issue. Politicians may praise each other, but it is a disservice to our education system.

August 3, 2014
Muhammad Bari:

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August 3, 2014
Lamia:

"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 (MCB) – it is open to a range of different interpretations, and therefore does not persuasively support Clarke's conclusions."

Please would Mr Richardson offer us his 'range of different interpretations' for this comment on gay people, quoted in the report:

Razwan Faraz
26/05/2013
08:57

"These animals are going out full force. As teachers we must be aware and counter their satanic ways of influencing young people."

That's just one example of the bile against other groups spouted by Faraz and co – and excused by a supposed 'leading educationalist'.

Evidently hysteria and hatred can be spun away as unimportant when it's aimed at gay people and other minorities by Muslims.

Well, Mr Richardson – your 'range of different interpretations'?

August 3, 2014
Just Visiting:

> Clarke's report is of very poor quality. So is the report by Ian Kershaw ...

You have not made an evidence-based case for why both those reports should be 'poor quality'.

Can you list, specifically what findings of those reports you feel are not true.

It is concerning that you quote mis-leading statements by others such as:

> Peter Clarke's report is not "forensic", as Nicky Morgan claims (Report, 22 July), but a biased mix of uncorroborated smear, anecdote, hoax and chatroom gossip.

When you know that that the 'chatroom gossip' is included in the report as prime evidence, not as gossip: it is evidence of what was actually being said by some of the key parties here.

Are you willing to issue a correction to your prevent your article, which currently is clearly misleading in this regard.

August 5, 2014

Robin Richardson:

Lamia and Just Visiting: I agree that my article could and should have been clearer on the points that you raise and am grateful to you for drawing my attention to them. I shall in due course probably write an extensive critique of the Clarke and Kershaw reports, as will others, and at that point will bear your concerns in mind and try to be clearer. Suffice to say at present that my concern in this preliminary article was to focus on the speech by the new secretary of state and on her claim that the Clarke report offers important recommendations on how to address the challenge of dealing with extremism before it becomes violent. Thank you again, Robin Richardson.

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