

# Preventing and addressing extremism in schools

A briefing note for the Education Select Committee,  
House of Commons, July 2014

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## **Introduction and summary**

This briefing note for the Education Select Committee was compiled in early July 2014. It contains extracts from six relevant articles which have appeared in newspapers or on websites during the last three months. The purpose is to indicate the principal lines of enquiry which members of the committee may wish to pursue. The extracts are as follows:

1. ISSUES REQUIRING ATTENTION, by Tim Brighouse<sup>1</sup>
  2. THE HEART OF INNER CITY SCHOOLING, by Shamim Miah<sup>2</sup>
  3. AN INVIDIOUS POSITION, by Jacqueline Baxter<sup>3</sup>
  4. WHAT IT MEANS TO BE CIVILISED, by Muhammad Khan<sup>4</sup>
  5. A SOURCE OF DEEP SHAME, by Lee Donaghy<sup>5</sup>
  6. A COMPELLING GUIDE TO THE DEBATE, BY Peter Osborne<sup>6</sup>
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## **1. ISSUES REQUIRING ATTENTION, by Tim Brighouse**

**Sir Tim Brighouse, formerly chief education officer in Birmingham and schools commissioner for London, comments that, as the Trojan horse furore in Birmingham continues and spreads, five issues emerge that require urgent national attention:**

- First, our system of school governance is broken and needs a total overhaul: its weaknesses contributed significantly to the real and imaginary problems in Birmingham.
- Second, the role and power of the education secretary needs to be reduced and his relationship with Ofsted clarified – neither can be trusted to act efficiently or fairly.
- Third, Ofsted itself needs to set out its working methods more openly if it is to retain the respect of those it inspects.
- Fourth, the place of religious bodies and their organised faiths in schools needs to be understood and reframed.
- Finally, there is an urgent need to provide help to the schools involved in the Trojan horse affair to avoid enormous damage to their pupils' education and community cohesion.

**With specific regard to the third of these five issues, Ofsted, Brighthouse comments that there is a host of questions arising:**

- What did the commissioning letter from Gove ask?
  - Who were the inspection team and what was their experience and knowledge of the issues?
  - Were they accompanied by HMI national experts?
  - What was their common guiding brief and how did it define signs of "extremism" and "radicalisation"?
  - Did they stick to their tradition of reporting only on what they saw and ignoring hearsay evidence?
  - How systematically did they collect the views of parents?
  - What were communications between the Department for Education and Ofsted during the process?
  - These should be easy questions to answer, Sir Tim points out, since Ofsted boasts a commitment to transparency as one of its guiding principles.
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## **2. THE HEART OF INNER CITY SCHOOLING, by Shamim Miah**

**Dr Shamim Miah, a senior lecturer on religion and education at the University of Huddersfield, has made a close study of this summer's 21 Ofsted reports on schools in Birmingham. Six of the 21 are secondary schools, twelve are primary, one is an all-through 4-19 school, one is a combined primary and nursery school and one is a nursery school.**

'The significance of the Ofsted reports lies not only in the redefining of extremism to equate with Muslim cultural conservatism, with the implicit assumption that Muslims have sole monopoly over cultural conservatism, but also in the ways in which a seemingly independent body is used by the state to embed the government's counter terrorism programme of preventing violent extremism at the heart of inner city schooling ...This discursive shift away from educational attainment and social inequality to securitisation of education is one of the crucial legacies arising from the Ofsted rulings.'

**Dr Miah cites the example of the report on the nursery school and provides a link to it. The report requires the nursery to make three urgent improvements in the way it provides education for children aged 3–5. Two of these are 'ensure that key policies such as the child protection policy, anti-bullying and behaviour policies include reference to identifying and minimising extremist behaviour' and 'train all staff in recognising risk of potential radicalisation and extremism'. He concludes:**

'Prior to the Ofsted intervention with Birmingham schools, Ofsted used to carry a degree of trust, legitimacy and transparency within Muslim communities. Ofsted inspection reports were one of the many sources used by Muslim parents to inform choice and type

of school for their children. Following the publication and subsequent debate over the Trojan Horse in Birmingham schools, not only has Ofsted compromised its independence but also its credibility. It has helped establish a de-facto-dual inspection framework; one for schools with large cohort of Muslim pupils and the other for remaining schools. It has further reinforced the image of Muslims as suspect communities by undermining current and future Muslim school governors.'

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### **3. AN INVIDIOUS POSITION, by Jacqueline Baxter**

**Dr Jacqueline Baxter is a lecturer in social policy at the Open University and director of the BA Hons in social policy and criminology. Like Dr Miah, she argues that Ofsted's reputation has been severely tarnished by the Trojan Horse affair.**

'Ofsted has never in its 20 year history had to deal with anything resembling the Trojan Horse affair. Established in 1992 and set up by John Major's conservative government, it was a key element in the drive to improve transparency in the public services and to provide parents with more information about schools – to shine a light into the secret garden of education and reveal what lay within, [thus e]nding the so called producer dominance which the government felt had characterised education for so long, and make this, along with other public services, more responsive to the needs of the public they purported to serve.

'... [T]he Trojan Horse affair, and the high profile media campaign which preceded it, has placed Ofsted in an invidious position. The process that has declared as failing schools that were previously rated outstanding has raised questions not only in terms of the methodology by which judgements were reached but, perhaps more influentially, they have created a discourse of anti-Muslimism around the agency which will be very difficult to shift. The recent declarations by Gove on the future policing of British Values implies that Ofsted will be central in judging not only what these values actually are, but equally whether they are present or not within schools.

'This will leave Ofsted with a very tricky course to steer in terms of its politically impartial stance. There is already a cacophony of dissent on the internet from both governors and parents wondering who these so called British values will be designed to include and exclude from school governance, and to what extent this will represent another type of Trojan Horse- this time filled with the type of British Values which may be equally as destructive as the hard-line Muslim versions.

'... Created by a hoax document and crafted by political sound bites, leaked reports, government arguments and media speculation the Trojan Horse Affair has created so much noise that the individuals responsible for bringing the affair to light and carefully orchestrating it have in the meantime faded into the background of public consciousness as the affair takes on international significance as it mixes with discourse of extremism, Britishness and public outcry.

'However history remembers it, the plot – hoax or not – has revealed some deeply disturbing insights into the ways in which current so called 'school freedoms' are operating. These are issues that will in the longer term need to be addressed in a far

more cohesive way than government current approaches. But, if anything, the affair should also be remembered as a perfect example of the way in which the careful crafting of a crisis and skilful manipulation of the media is capable of inflicting untold damage on communities, the inspectorate and the current system of education that will, in the longer term, take far more than a government soundbite to fix.'

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#### **4. WHAT IT MEANS TO BE CIVILISED, by Muhammad Khan**

**Dr Muhammad Khan is a tutor in youth and community work at Ruskin College, Oxford, and is the author of *Young Muslims, Pedagogy and Islam: contexts and concerns*, published by Policy Press in 2013. He was until recently a governor at Saltley School, Birmingham.**

'Broadsheets, tabloids, TV and radio have been having a field day about the various allegations regarding supposed Muslim plots to take over Birmingham schools. As a governor at one of the schools in the eye of the storm, I see it in a wider context, namely the claim of our society to be civilised not just rhetorically, but in action. The so-called 'Trojan Horse' document is not, as the media speculate, a 'hoax', ie, a simple crude trick or joke. Rather, it is being used to destabilise governing bodies in Muslim majority schools in Birmingham by galvanising Ofsted into snap inspections that would find these governing bodies unfit for governance, caricaturing them as driven by ideology rather than student needs. In its intended consequences it is not too dissimilar to that of the Zinoviev letter which led to the downfall of the first Labour government in the 1924 by galvanising public opinion against the spectre of socialism and communism. Today, just change that to Islam.

'Over the last few weeks a number of allegations have been made about governors in Birmingham schools being involved in a jihadist plot to take over and 'Talibanise' schools as part of Operation Trojan Horse. These allegations have included plots to overthrow heads and in the case of Saltley School (where I am a governor), the governing body has been falsely accused of banning sex education, stopping GCSE citizenship classes, forcing everyone to eat halal food – something present in schools for at least 25 years – and ultimately aiming for secession into an academy, in order to gain complete control of the school and its curriculum. In the course of this same period, Muslim school governors have been referred to by the media as jihadist plotters, Muslim zealots, Salafi fundamentalists, Islamic fundamentalists, Muslim fundamentalists, Islamists, etc. The vocabulary is impressive and journalists' ability confidently to use it as a way of describing Muslims even more so.

'These are emotive terms and methods designed to play on people's fears and prejudices, tapping into a vein of Islamophobic sentiment that is never far from the surface, eliciting caution, fear and a horrible doubt that affects Muslim men and women in all walks of life in this country. They are reminiscent of witch hunts in the Middle Ages or McCarthyism in post-war America.

'... Since the Education Acts of the 1980s, governments have consistently asked for greater involvement, challenge and accountability from school governors. Governors are obliged therefore to ask questions when they think there is a conflict between the interests of the children and the interests of the school – or, for that matter, the

government. So questioning the relative value of citizenship or philosophy or English literature, of BTEC or GCSE courses, can so easily be interpreted falsely as governor bullying in predominantly-Muslim schools when all we want is the best future for all children.

'It is not easy being a Muslim school governor when Islamophobic characteristics are so prevalent. It is not surprising, therefore, that increasingly many school governors in Muslim majority schools think twice about their position, and some, whether Muslim or not, decide to leave. As each does, ignorance claims another victory and our society loses one more advocate of what it means to be civilised.'

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## **5. A SOURCE OF DEEP SHAME, by Lee Donaghy**

**Lee Donaghy is an assistant principal of Park View School in Birmingham. The school shows recognition and respect for the British Muslim identities of the pupils, and sees this recognition and respect as a key ingredient underlying their academic success. The school was visited by Ofsted in March.**

'[The] Ofsted inspectors ... left us with a list of mild recommendations for improvement. We had an action plan ready to be implemented the very next day. However, when the same inspectors returned ten days later, they told us within hours that the school would be rated inadequate. Our strongly held belief is that the inspectors were ordered back into the school by somebody who felt that Park View had to be placed in special measures to enable the removal of Park View Educational Trust.

'The inspectors' conduct during that second visit left pupils and staff feeling like suspects in a criminal investigation. From female pupils asked whether they were forced to wear the hijab (despite girls in the same class clearly not doing so) to one staff member being asked "Are you homophobic?", we were subjected to inappropriate and bizarre lines of questioning, designed to elicit the evidence required to damn us. This culminated on the second day in an inspector making a quip about there being "so many members of staff with beards" – a clearly Islamophobic comment.

'Over the past three months the pupils and parents of Alum Rock, the tight-knit, overwhelmingly Muslim community we serve, have become unwitting players in a vast game of academies, anti-extremism policy, Whitehall leaks and faith schools. Not a thought for our year-11s sitting crucial exams, or their parents. But then, these people are Muslims, and Islamophobia the last acceptable prejudice.

'Throughout this crisis staff have maintained our focus on what has always been our priority: raising achievement so that pupils can take full advantage of the opportunities Britain and the wider world offer. That we respect and honour our pupils' Muslim faith is a source of pride to me. That this should be used by some politicians and some in the media as a slur that we are inviting extremism should be a source of deep shame to them.'

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## 6. A COMPELLING GUIDE TO THE DEBATE, BY Peter Osborne

**Peter Osborne is chief political commentator at the Daily Telegraph and associate editor of the Spectator. He refers to the Trojan Horse affair in a review of two recent books about British Islam, *Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent: Inside British Islam* by Innes Bowen, published by Hurst, and *The Muslims Are Coming! – Islamophobia, extremism and the domestic war on terror*, published by Verso. He writes:**

'Many people have come to regard Muslims as a backward group of religious extremists estranged from wider society and incapable of coming to terms with what it means to be British. This impression has been heightened by misleading press reporting and inflammatory statements from senior politicians. The so-called Trojan horse controversy concerning an alleged Muslim takeover of Birmingham schools – based on what looks like a fabricated document – has brought fresh ugliness to an already putrid public debate.

'There are elements of truth in the popular narrative about British Islam, but much of it is based on ignorance ... So the publication of these two books could not be more timely.

'Innes Bowen, a BBC radio journalist, has written an admirable and clear-headed study which has much to teach anyone with an interest in British Islam ... I urge every commentator and politician who wants to open his or her mouth about British Islam to read this work. Bowman dispels a long list of myths about the role of Saudi teaching in mosques, the influence of Iran among British Shia (very little), the connection between the doctrines of Tablighi Jamaat and terrorism (none), and the alleged shortage of British-born imams (there are plenty). Above all, she suggests that there is no contradiction between Muslim identity and loyalty to the British state. Her eyes remain open, and she is not blind to the faults of British Muslims and their, in some cases, disastrously misguided leaders. But this well-written book is a desperately needed antidote to the hare-brained commentary from politicians and writers who ought to know much better.

'Arun Kundnani has written a very different kind of work. It is angrier and more polemical. Yet it too is grounded in research from both sides of the Atlantic. He breaks down Western analysis of Islam into rival schools of thought. According to one approach, Islamic culture is a hopeless case: incompatible with modernity because of an alleged failure to separate religion from the state. According to the second school, there is nothing wrong with Islam itself: "Rather than the legacy of a pre-modern, Oriental religion, extremism is the result of 20th-century ideologues who transformed Islam's essentially benign teachings into an anti-modern, totalitarian, political ideology."

'Both doctrines, asserts Kundnani, have the same effect. They both place the blame for terrorism on an alien ideology. They both absolve the West from responsibility and "eschew the role of social and political circumstances in shaping how people make sense of the world and then act on it". Kundnani is clear that Western aggression bears a great deal of the responsibility for the violence that is currently wracking the world. His book is a harder read than Bowen's, and his arguments more difficult to stomach. ... Like Bowen's it dispels myths, pointing out that "there is no Islamic doctrine of 'kill the unbelievers' as anti-Islam propagandists often maintain. Islam, like other religions,

provides a broad moral framework for thinking about questions of violence.” Again and again this book challenges your assumptions. It is worth reading for its examination of the word “extremism” alone.

‘... Bowen’s book is at bottom gentle and optimistic. She suggests that over time there is no fundamental contradiction between Islam and the modern Western state. Kundnani is fiercer and more pessimistic. I hope and believe that Bowen’s outlook is closer to the truth – but these books should be read together. In their different ways they provide a compelling guide to the debate over the nature of British Islam.’

## Sources

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<sup>1</sup> **Trojan Horse affair: five lessons we must learn**, by Tim Brighouse, *The Guardian*, 17 June 2014 <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/jun/17/trojan-horse-affair-five-lessons-help-schools>

<sup>2</sup> **Trojan Horse, Ofsted and the preventing of education** by Shamim Miah, *Discover Society*, 1 July 2014, <http://www.discoversociety.org/2014/07/01/trojan-horse-ofsted-and-the-preventing-of-education/>

<sup>3</sup> **The Trojan Horse, the media and the Ofsted inspectorate**, by Jacqueline Baxter, *Discover Society*, 1 July 2014, <http://www.discoversociety.org/2014/07/01/policy-briefing-trojan-horse-the-media-and-the-ofsted-inspectorate-2/>

<sup>4</sup> **The Trojan Horse is being used to destabilise Muslim majority schools by galvanising Ofsted**, by M G Khan, *Times Educational Supplement*, 27 March 2014 <http://news.tes.co.uk/b/opinion/2014/03/27/the-trojan-horse-is-being-used-to-destabilise-muslim-majority-schools-by-galvanising-ofsted-39.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> **Ofsted’s slur on the Muslim community of Park View School** by Lee Donaghy, *The Guardian*, 9 June 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jun/09/ofsted-slur-muslim-park-view-school-values-extremism>

<sup>6</sup> **Dispelling myths about British Muslims**, by Peter Osborne, *Daily Telegraph*, 21 June 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/10911636/Dispelling-myths-about-British-Muslims.html>