

Peter Delivers — a horse, a hoax, hysteria, hope

Opening remarks at a seminar, Birmingham, 23 October 2014



'Peter'

'Mr Speaker,' said Nicky Morgan when she rose to address the House of Commons at 12.35 pm on Tuesday 22 July 2014, '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, now the chief whip on this side of the House [Michael Gove], for his determination in the face of criticism to invite Peter to take on this task.'ⁱ

The reference to 'Peter' implied a close relationship between the Cabinet and the person they had appointed to investigate the Trojan Horse affair. You wonder who else may have the good fortune to belong to that chummy coterie, and what other coterie they are on chummy terms with, and what and whose interests they have most at heart, and the cronies they most strive to defend and advance.

Clarke's exercise in forensic clarity included, you remember, drawing bizarre diagrams reminiscent of spider webs to depict networks of, as he saw them, sinister connections amongst people here in Birmingham.

If you were to stoop momentarily to Clarke's low level and were yourself minded to sketch such a diagram to show *his* sinister connections, who and what would your diagram contain – which foundational texts and authors, which moving and shaking columnists, broadcasters and media owners, which lobbies and campaigns, which NGOs and think tanks, which sources of funding, and – giving clout to and gaining clout from the ideology his report exudes – which political, material, commercial and military interests?

Such a diagram would contain somewhere not only Nicky's and Michael's good friend Peter and their slightly less good friend Theresa but also Kershaw and Wilshaw and various others, either directly or through proxies and fronts. Constructing it here today would be a satisfying but perhaps self-indulgent and rather infantile use of our time. We have more nuanced and more scholarly, and more urgent and more serious and more constructive, tasks to see to.

This seminar

But certainly we shall necessarily be aware throughout the programme today, as we examine the reports by Clarke, Kershaw and Ofsted, and the media and political coverage of them, that the discourse, ideology and grand narrative they contain are powerful and indeed dominant not only in the education system but also in Britain more generally, and not only on the political right but also in all parts of the party-political spectrum, and not only in Britain but also globally – in Berlin and Paris, and in Canberra, Moscow and Washington, not only in London. In a brief phrase, the great but not grand narrative is that 'the Muslims are coming'.

Today's seminar has its origins in two letters published in the Guardian earlier this year. The signatories to the letters wished to signal they had fundamental objections to the dominant narrative that was taking shape in the media and the government around the Trojan Horse affair, and to express solidarity with the people and communities in Birmingham most likely to be harmed by it. They thought that one way forward for people such as themselves, mainly academics and mainly based outside Birmingham, would be to convene a seminar based on a call for papers. So here we are.

Most of the letters' signatories have been involved, through email if not more directly, in planning today's event. Before saying a bit more about today's programme, I'd like on behalf of the signatories to thank David Gillborn and his colleagues here at the Centre for Research in Race and Education for their welcome and hospitality. They were not personally involved in the letters, and do not necessarily agree with everything in them. But they have agreed to host this occasion, and thus provide a forum in which relevant issues can be aired in academic space. The signatories are very grateful to them.

There are four sessions today. The first is about coverage of the Trojan Horse affair in the media. The second is about the Clarke, Kershaw and Ofsted reports on it. The third is about the impact and consequences for communities and young people, and for teachers and student teachers. The fourth is about practical ways forward.

Our discussions today take place, we remember, in the context of the Chatham House Rule – we are welcome to use information we receive here today, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of a speaker, nor that of any other participant, may be disclosed. The purpose is to encourage openness and the sharing of information in relation to issues which are not only controversial but also, for many people here, deeply sensitive and emotive.

Equus donatus

Throughout the day we shall touch on issues which predate the Trojan Horse affair and which exist independently of it. For example, the print media have commercial reasons for pandering to moral panic by demonising certain groups and communities, and idealising an imagined community and imagined tradition under threat. By the same token, political parties and individual politicians have electoral reasons for such demonising and idealising, either explicitly or with dog whistles.

There's a sense in which it doesn't matter who and what gets demonised and idealised providing you sell enough papers, and mobilise enough votes.

For the commercial and electoral purposes of the media and politicians, the Trojan Horse was a gift horse, an *equus donatus*, and true to form they didn't bother looking at dental records or into the mouth itself. They'd gotta horse, one that would run and run, one that was a dead cert to be a winner. And the nuanced avoidance of mixed metaphors, of course, was the least of their concerns. (Nor did they bother much about who jumped on the bandwagon the horse was towing, or about flogging it beyond its sell-by date.)

Ignorant armies

We also remember here today various other matters that similarly exist independently of the Trojan Horse affair, though they have inevitably become entangled with it. For example, there have always been and always will be tensions between central and local government. And there are tensions and disagreements, and always have been and always will be, wherever people gather to deliberate and decide about the nature and purposes of education – staff meetings, council meetings, faculty meetings, parents evenings, governors meetings.

Such meetings at their best are fruitful spaces for non-formal community-based political education. But they can alternatively be, to recall words once written by a member of Her Majesty's Inspectorate who was also a bit of a wordsmith, though there's no evidence he had discussions of education specifically in mind when he wrote them, 'as on a darkling plain/ Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,/ Where ignorant armies clash by night'.

The perception of Matthew Arnold HMI that we are 'as on a darkling plain/ Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,/ Where ignorant armies clash by night' can be affected by, and contextualised and exacerbated by, but is seldom if ever solely or even primarily caused by, differences of culture, religion, theology, worldview.

But Arnold's words do seem to describe well some of the recent antics of Clarke, Kershaw and Wilshaw, and of columnists and editorial staff in the illiberal press, and of politicians in all parties. Hopefully they are not, however, a fair description of the discussions and deliberations here today, which now begin.

The seminar on the Trojan Horse affair took place at the School of Education, University of Birmingham, Thursday 23 October 2014. The opening remarks were made by Robin Richardson.

ⁱ The quotation here is from the official version of Nicky Morgan's *Oral Statement on the Trojan Horse Letter* issued on 22 July 2014, last accessed on 16 September 2020. In the Hansard version of the statement, however, the reference to 'Peter' was changed to 'Mr Clarke'.