

Challenging the Race Relations Consensus

– the Runnymede Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia,
some notes and memories

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The first meeting

It was in May 1996 that the first meeting took place of – as it was at that time called – the Runnymede Trust Commission on Islamophobia. The first item on the agenda was self-introductions. This went well and a cordial, mutually respectful atmosphere was impressively established. There was a great sense that the group would work well together and produce in due course a unanimous report.

The second item on the agenda was the commission's draft terms of reference. This occasioned lively and quite lengthy discussion. No one was actually offensive about anyone else but there were incompatible and apparently non-negotiable understandings amongst the commissioners about why they had all been brought together. It looked as if cooperation and consensus would be totally impossible and that the commission would have to be wound up before it properly began. The discussion focused around the commission's proposed name.

Some of those present were entirely happy with 'commission on Islamophobia' as the title and were not prepared to modify it in any way. They had only agreed to be members of the commission, they declared, on the understanding that the proposed title could not and would not be changed. Others said that minimally the title needed modifying but preferably should not contain the word Islamophobia at all. Arguments underlying the latter position included the following: the concept of 'phobia' is unacceptable, since it implies deep-seated mental illness and should only be used in medical contexts and by medical experts; the word Islamophobia is virtually unknown in the wider world and its use in the title of the commission would therefore provoke derision or anger, or both, amongst people unfamiliar with it; all the commission's members were UK citizens or long-term residents of the UK and as a group they would not have appropriate expertise or credibility to talk about Islamophobia even in the rest of Europe let alone in the world at large: for this reason if no other the title must imply a focus on Britain rather than on everywhere; and the hostility that Muslims in Britain and the world experience from others is to an extent provoked by themselves and the commission should signal awareness of this in its very title.

Those who did not want the word Islamophobia in the commission's title coalesced round the view that the title should be 'commission on British Muslims'. This was entirely unacceptable to others, particularly in view of some of the arguments that had been advanced in support of it. There appeared to be total impasse. The chairperson, whose day job was that of a university vice-chancellor, remained silent throughout the discussion. In due course he made a proposal that was accepted with relief by all though with enthusiasm by none. 'Let's call ourselves,' he said, 'the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia.' He added, with perhaps a hint of exasperation in his voice: 'Can we now move on'. No one objected. But in various ways the arguments and disagreements re-surfaced and re-played on several further occasions over the following fifteen months.

This article

This article, written in autumn 2004, is a personal reminiscence about how the commission was set up and about how it operated. It is written from memory not with

recourse to study of formal – or even informal – records. I am confident that I have not consciously distorted anything. But I have almost certainly embroidered for the sake of telling a story, as is perhaps already evident, and my memory no doubt plays tricks. Other people who were involved in the commission in 1996 – and there were many – would give different accounts and highlight different episodes. I am not going to use the personal pronoun other than in this preliminary note and hope the omission does not give a false or misleading sense of objectivity and total factual accuracy. My own locus in the story was as follows. In the period 1991– 1996 I was the director of the Runnymede Trust, the research organisation that set up the commission, and was much involved with the trustees in planning it and getting it established; I was then present at every meeting of the commission in the period May 1996–July 1997 as a recorder of the discussions; and in summer 1997 I worked with a small group of commissioners to draft – and re-draft and re-draft – the commission’s final report; I continued, in 1999–2004, to work as a consultant for the commission.

The origins of the Runnymede Trust

The Runnymede Trust was founded in 1968, after several years of gestation. The two people most associated with its creation were E J B Rose (known universally as Jim Rose) and Anthony Lester (subsequently Lord Lester). Lester was a constitutional lawyer who had been much influenced by direct experience of the civil rights movement in the United States. Rose was a former journalist who was the director of a major survey of race issues in Britain in the 1960s. His magisterial study *Colour and Citizenship*, published by Oxford University Press in 1969, acted as Runnymede’s founding document in the 1970s and early 1980s. It also had a major influence on the creation of the Race Relations Act 1976, as did Anthony Lester personally in his capacity as adviser to the Home Secretary and as principal author of the white paper that preceded the Act’s creation. Runnymede’s first director, Dipak Nandy, was also much involved in the writing of the white paper. All three of these were closely associated with the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination (CARD), a coalition that successfully lobbied in the 1960s for race relations legislation to be put on the statute book.

Up until about 1990 the dominant terms in Runnymede’s discourse were race, race relations and colour – the Trust was imbued, at both staff level and trustee level, with the consensus established by the Race Relations Acts of the 1960s and 1976. Everyone, in the world constructed by such discourse, was either white or coloured – or, as terminology developed in the eighties – white or black. (Latterly, since about 1998, white or BME – black and minority ethnic.) The world-view reflected in this language was derived in part from the United States and in part from Britain’s experience as a colonial power. Alternative world-views were in due course advocated within the Runnymede staff team by one of the researchers, Kaushika Amin. She for her part was influenced by the magazine *Q News* and its predecessors; by the work of the An-Nisa Society, based in Brent in north west London; and by the writings of someone who in those days was an officer at the Commission for Racial Equality, Tariq Modood. She was supported in her advocacy by Runnymede’s new director from 1991 onwards. They persuaded Runnymede’s trustees to publish a selection of Modood’s writings and to set up a commission on a form of racism that was entirely clearly not to do with colour, antisemitism.

Commission on antisemitism

The notion of a commission on antisemitism fairly readily won trustees’ approval. A pragmatic reason for this was that it was attractive to potential funders. Another was that several of the trustees knew personally a number of eminent and expert people who could be approached to be members of such a commission. Another was that the topic appeared (wrongly, as it turned out) basically uncontroversial and unlikely to land the Trust in negative publicity or in disputes it could not handle. There was total unanimity when a trustee proposed that the bishop of Oxford, Richard Harries, should be the commission’s chair and that he and this trustee should have delegated responsibility for selecting and inviting the commission’s members. Within less than a week of the two of

them meeting, the members of the commission had all been invited and all had accepted.

Harries proved to be a consummate chairperson. The most delicate issue he had to deal with was conflicting views of Israel/Palestine. Under what circumstances, and in what ways, are criticisms of Israel and Zionism antisemitic? Virtually always, in effect if not in intention, as some members of the commission contended? Or virtually never, as others argued? The commission came close to collapse on this issue, with the real possibility of high-profile resignations if it could not agree. Harries secured agreement on a form of words about differing perceptions of the international situation. Rather more easily, he secured agreement with a proposal that one of the report's formal recommendations should be that Runnymede should set up a broadly similar commission on Islamophobia.

Runnymede's trustees did not reject this recommendation. It took them almost two years, however, to implement it. They had great difficulty in agreeing who should be approached to chair the proposed commission on Islamophobia and what the procedures should be for inviting people to be members. Most were mindful that they did not have personal contact with experts in the field or with prominent and trusted members of Muslim communities. They feared that something could go horribly wrong, though they could not specify exactly what, and they feared they would be out of their depth, and would lose control, if and when it did. Some though not all were unhappy about such a radical departure from the prevailing race relations paradigm enshrined in *Colour and Citizenship* and the 1976 Act; and had unhappy memories of how CARD in the 1960s (see above) had fragmented and collapsed.

Eventually, the trustees put their confidence in a single trustee's judgment that Gordon Conway, vice-chancellor of the University of Sussex, would be a good chairperson. (It was the same trustee who had proposed Richard Harries for the earlier commission. But in that instance certain other trustees knew the proposed chairperson personally and all, without exception, knew him by reputation to be a safe pair of hands.) They insisted also, however, that at least three trustees should be members of the commission and that these three would have a large say with Conway, or indeed a greater say than Conway, in determining who the other members would be. The three people in question, it is perhaps important to mention and stress, were entirely sympathetic to the view that the prevailing race relations consensus in Britain should be challenged.

Consultation

Events then moved swiftly and smoothly and a commission was established that had substantial expertise and credibility. Conway, like Harries before him, was a brilliant chairperson. He was unfailingly cheerful, good-humoured and friendly. But he single-mindedly kept meetings focused on the agenda and he gently but uncompromisingly kept in rein any member of the commission who was inclined to be more talkative than he, Conway, considered appropriate. He was entirely clear that the commission was about Islamophobia, not about British Muslims, but equally clear that it was about the impact of Islamophobia in Britain, not in the world generally. He insisted that the first task of the commission was to identify the questions it wanted to pose; that the second task was to invite widespread discussion of these questions; and that only then need it consider and debate the answers. He believed this process would assist consensus in due course about the answers and in this he was proved right.

During the drafting of the consultation paper there was disagreement amongst commissioners about the first letter in the word Islamophobia. Should it be big or little? The upper-casist faction argued that the five-letter word Islam is always spelt with a capital letter and that any word beginning with those five letters should accordingly be thus spelt also. The lower-casist faction had two arguments. One was aesthetic – capital letters, it contended, are ugly unless used for the names of people or places. The other was conceptual – Islamophobia, it was argued, is not primarily, principally or essentially about Islam; therefore, the argument continued, it should not be spelt with a capital I, since this would imply it is.

Well, the lower-casists won the first round and when the commission its consultation paper in early 1997 the questions were about islamophobia (lower case), not Islamophobia (upper). This provoked many negative reactions, however, particularly from Muslim organisations and individuals, and the rest is history. Nowadays even *The Guardian* spells Islamophobia with a capital I. (The commission also contained a peace-making faction, of course, which argued the middle-case case. Most members of the commission came to consider this was conceptually the best solution. Typographically, however, it was not at all easy to operationalise!)

The consultation paper was entitled *Islamophobia: its features and dangers* and took the form of an A5 24-page booklet. It concluded with five principles or propositions to guide further action. Also, there were nine questions for discussion and consideration. The five propositions were as follows:

Urgency. Islamophobia is a serious and dangerous feature of contemporary affairs and culture. It is urgent that substantial measures should be adopted to confront it reduce it.

Many roles. Many different people in Britain have significant roles to play, both separately and in cooperation and coordination with each other. They include politicians and journalists, both nationally and locally; opinion-formers and policy-makers in a wide range of fields, including education, the justice system, employment and government; church leaders; and prominent members of Muslim communities.

Many tasks. Many kinds of action are required. No one measure will be sufficient in itself. Changes in the law on discrimination are probably required, for example, but so also are less tangible and visible measures relating to attitudes and beliefs, and to building trust and respect.

A significant distinction. A distinction needs to be drawn, both by Muslims and non-Muslims, between phobic opposition to Islam on the one hand and reasonably criticism and disagreement on the other. Not all criticisms of Islam are intrinsically phobic.

The international dimension. Islamophobia within Britain is affected by trends and events elsewhere. So also, within Britain, are Muslim self-definitions, perceptions and identities. The international dimension needs to be borne in mind, but is no excuse for not tackling islamophobia [*sic*] within Britain with great urgency.

The questions for consultation were to do with legislation on religious discrimination and incitement to religious hatred; inclusion of Muslims in politics and governance; education; the media; employment; the roles and responsibilities of non-Muslim communities to challenge and remove Islamophobia; the tasks and roles of Muslim communities; and confidence-building.

The written responses to the booklet were overwhelmingly positive, particularly from Muslim organisations and individuals. They included a remarkably substantial submission from the Islamic Foundation and this was invaluable when the commission came in due course to formulate its final report. The only criticism or reservation from Muslim organisations was to do with the spelling of Islamophobia – they insisted that the word should have an upper-case I. The discussion paper had used lower case, as mentioned above, on the grounds that the word is conceptually similar to antisemitism and xenophobia and to signal that the Islam feared by non-Muslims is in key respects a bogey of the western imagination, not an objective reality. When the eventual report came to be written, however, upper case was used.

There was virtually no response from the race relations world. The booklet was sent to all race equality councils in Britain and to a wide range of race equality officers in public bodies. Very few, however, replied. One problem in this regard is that a high proportion of individuals working in the race equality field are agnostic or humanist in their own personal beliefs and disbeliefs and are suspicious of all religion, not just of Islam. Those who do have a personal faith, for example as committed Christians or observant Jews, may have profound theological objections to any religious tradition other than their own. Another problem is that Christians active in inter-faith work are often uncomfortable with concepts and realities to do with racism and prejudice. There is in consequence a gulf between Christian antiracism and Christian involvement in inter-faith work: few connections are made either conceptually or organisationally, and either nationally or locally.

Throughout the commission's deliberations Gordon Conway declined to permit consideration of the final report's title. He hoped the decision about the title would be unanimous but ruled that it should be considered informally over a buffet lunch at the commission's last meeting, not as a formal agenda item. The discussion went back and forth. It was friendly and respectful but agreement seemed impossible. 'At the very least,' said someone, 'we must hit on a title that stresses that Islamophobia is a challenge for everyone, a challenge for us all.' Someone else said: 'Well, what's wrong with that?'

Outcomes and reflections

Islamophobia: a challenge for us all was published in autumn 1997 and was launched at the House of Commons by the then Home Secretary, Jack Straw. It made 60 formal recommendations and many of these were in due course implemented, though not necessarily – of course – as a direct result of the commission's report. However, some of the potentially most important recommendations were ignored or misunderstood. Consider, for example, recommendation number 56, very slightly adapted for quotation out of context:

Race equality organisations and monitoring groups should address Islamophobia in their programmes of action, for example by advocating and lobbying for the policy and procedural changes recommended in this report.

Race equality organisations, led (as it were) by the Commission for Racial Equality, did not even comment formally on this recommendation, let alone make any attempt to implement it. Instead, they colluded with moves to define Islamophobia as nothing more than 'discrimination on grounds of religion or belief'.

It is relevant in this regard to recall the word Islamophobia first became current in the UK in the late 1980s in the context of campaigns to counter anti-Muslim hostility not primarily in society at large but amongst people working in the field of race relations. The latter included the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) nationally and race equality councils locally; also it included race equality officers and units in local authorities. All these were perceived to be insensitive and indifferent to the distinctive forms of ignorance, intolerance, discrimination and violence experienced by Muslims. The failure of the CRE and other race equality bodies to take serious account of Islamophobia is arguably an example of institutional Islamophobia.

In 1999 the commission was re-constituted with Dr Richard Stone as its chair and with Kaushika Amin, formerly at Runnymede, as its full-time director and secretary. Stone was a trustee of Runnymede but to all intents and purposes the commission was now wholly detached from the body that had created it. For a time its office was in the building in Victoria, London, occupied by the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) and the stand-off with this part of the race world began to heal a bit, anyway at interpersonal levels. But extensive lobbying to amend the Race Relations (Amendment) Bill in 2000, or minimally to amend the formal guidance issued by the CRE in relation to the new

legislation, came to nothing. The commission was told off-the-record that it was the Home Office that refused to permit a few extra sentences in the CRE guidance, not the CRE itself.

Later, the stand-off with this part of the race world dissolved further when the person who had been chair of Runnymede at the time it set up the commission on Islamophobia, Trevor Phillips, became chair of the CRE. He made a number of statements and submissions, and took various measures, to signal clearly that he was prepared to encourage and support a move away from old paradigms, discourse and assumptions. At the time of writing (autumn 2004) it is not clear what the outcome will be. Nor is it clear what the impact of the commission's follow-up report in 2004 will be.

The task of an operation such as the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia is to do what is doable and say what is sayable, in the circumstances and constraints of its time and history, and with the human and material resources available to it. This article has in effect implied that the commission on Islamophobia was as successful as could be reasonably expected. The fact remains, however, that the dominant race relations paradigm was not at the time affected, and still has not been materially affected seven years since the commission's report was published.

With hindsight it is easier than it was seven years ago to see some of the things that went wrong or were inadequate and to engage in some wistful 'what if' questions:

- What if the commission had included formal representation from the CRE?
- What if it had engaged, from the very start, with senior civil servants at the Home Office?
- What if Runnymede had continued to give it high-profile support?
- What if the commission had found a way of raising and discussing difficult and sensitive questions about complexities, conflicts and dilemmas within British Muslim communities, and if it had then discussed and given guidance on the ensuing responsibilities of public bodies?
- What if it had anticipated that events in New York, Palestine, Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay and Iraq would one day quite soon have devastating effects on the dynamics of Islamophobia and the life-world of British Muslims?

Well, 'what if' questions have their uses. In particular they can help us to look again at potential and possibilities in the here and now and to do what is doable, and say what is sayable, here, now, today.

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