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The Trojan Horse affair in Birmingham

Competing and overlapping narratives, March—May 2014

INTRODUCTION: THIS PAPER'S CONTENT AND PURPOSE

There are several competing but overlapping narratives connected with the Trojan Horse affair in Birmingham. For each you can find supporting evidence. But also for each you can find evidence that goes against it. Eventually it will be clear or clearer, hopefully, which narrative approximates most closely to the truth. In the meanwhile it would be valuable to describe each narrative as clearly and accurately as possible, and without rushing to judgement regarding its truth. Hence this paper.

The purpose is to provide a framework for receiving and assessing the various reports which are going to emerge, and to provide a basis for deliberations about positive steps forward.

The paper briefly summarises some of the narratives currently in circulation. It refers to three main strands in the dominant narrative and two main strands in the counter narrative. In addition there is a complementary narrative that can combine either with the dominant narrative or with the counter narrative. In addition to these narratives there is a range of contextual factors.

The structure of the paper is as follows:

- Competing and overlapping narratives
 - 1.1. The dominant narrative a) both document and plot are genuine
 - 1.2. The dominant narrative b) document a forgery but plot real
 - 1.3. The dominant narrative c) dangers of radicalisation
 - 1.4. The counter narrative a) the needs of young Muslims
 1.5. The counter narrative b) anti-Muslim hostility

 - 1.6. A complementary narrative accountability in the education system

2 Contextual factors

- 2.1 Anxiety and uncertainty
- 2.2 Electoral politics
- 2.3 Other politics
- 2.4 Rivalries
- 2.5 Personal careers
- 2.6 The dangers of violence

Notes and sources

- 3.1 Comments on the narratives
- 3.2 Articles and blogs about the affair: a selection
- 3.3 Background: (a) the needs of young Muslims
- 3.4 Background: (b) 'Islam' and 'the West'

The paper is based on reading the reportage which has so far appeared in the press and the blogosphere, and on conversations and correspondence with people who work, or have recently worked, in Birmingham's education system. Comments, criticisms and suggestions are welcome.

The uncontested facts

First, a note about the uncontested facts. It is difficult or impossible to find a totally unbiased account of the facts. But two of the more neutral accounts are these:

BBC News: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-27024881

Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Trojan_Horse

COMPETING BUT OVERLAPPING NARRATIVES

The dominant narrative – a) Both the document and the plot are genuine

The Trojan Horse document which The Sunday Times described on 2 March was genuinely written by a Muslim in Birmingham for sending to a Muslim in Bradford. It was and is clear evidence of an unethical, unscrupulous and non-democratic plot to take over the governance and leadership of several state-run schools in Birmingham, and perhaps in other cities too, and run them on Islamic principles.

The dominant narrative – b) The document a forgery but the plot real

The document which The Sunday Times described on 2 March is largely or entirely a forgery. However, it helpfully draws attention to a genuine plot by certain Muslims to take over a number of schools in Birmingham, and probably in other cities too, and to the dangers of permitting Muslims to be involved in school governance and leadership.

The dominant narrative – c) Either way, the dangers of radicalisation

Regardless of whether or not there is a plot to take over schools, there are real dangers that young Muslims of secondary school age are becoming sympathetic to violent extremism. Schools are insufficiently aware of this threat. In consequence they are not taking sufficient care to safeguard and protect their students and are not implementing the government's Prevent strategy. The affair in Birmingham is therefore a timely reminder of the threat that Islam and Islamism pose to British society more generally, and of the need to implement the Prevent strategy in schools more rigorously.

The counter narrative: a) The needs of young Muslims

Muslim parents and communities rightly want the education received by Muslim children and young people to be improved. In recent years there have been major improvements nationally in the achievement of Pakistani heritage and Bangladeshi heritage pupils, and nationally there is no longer a gap between the

achievement of these pupils and the average for all pupils. But these improvements and greater equality of outcome are not evenly distributed through the country, and there continues to be a need, in Birmingham as elsewhere outside London, for attainment gaps to be narrowed and closed.

Amongst other things this means there needs to be more recognition in schools for British Muslim identities, more attention to issues of bilingualism, more commitment to the human right to freedom of religion, more attention to Islamophobia, and closer relationships with parents and communities. Further, it means there is a need for more Muslims to be involved actively in school governance and leadership. The Trojan Horse affair must not be allowed to hinder improvements that are urgently needed in educational provision, and in the representation of Muslims in educational policy-making and decision-making.

The counter narrative: b) Anti-Muslim hostility

The Trojan Horse document is clearly an incompetent forgery, for it is riddled with factual errors and howlers and is replete with anti-Muslim stereotypes, fantasies and phrases. The latter include the term Trojan Horse itself. Follow-up stories in the press, purporting to confirm the authenticity of the document and the reality of a plot, are inventions or gross exaggerations, or else are irrelevant.

The notion of a plot has been given credence by widespread and longstanding Islamophobia in British society and culture. The recurring themes and tropes in moral panics about Islam, clearly present in most of the media coverage of the Trojan Horse affair, are that all Muslims are the same, all are wholly different from non-Muslims in their values and aspirations, and all are a threat to non-Muslims both physically and culturally, for they are more likely than non-Muslims to condone or to engage in violence.

The affair in Birmingham is being used by certain organisations, groups and think tanks, some of them linked to the EDL and the BNP, to further their interests and agendas. Such organisations are funded in part by sources in the United States and are components in what is sometimes known as the global Islamophobia industry. Also the security services and counter terrorism units in Western countries are involved in this industry. The industry overall is concerned primarily with global oil supplies and Middle East politics, not with (for example) schools in a West Midlands city in England.

A complementary narrative: Accountability in the education system

The Trojan Affair in Birmingham is not primarily to do with whether or not there is a plot by certain Muslims to take over a number of schools. Rather, the key issue is how to hold a balance between autonomy and accountability in the education system. Up until 2010 the vast majority of state-funded schools in England were accountable to their local authority. The coalition government that came into power nationally in that year is strongly of the view that a necessary condition for improvements in education is that schools should have greater autonomy, and should not be subject to local authority scrutiny and control. The situation now (May 2014) is that more than half of all secondary schools are no longer part of a local authority.

In the view of some, the Trojan Horse affair illustrates the dangers of permitting schools to have undue autonomy. In the view of others, it illustrates the dangers of permitting oversight of schools to be in the hands of local authorities. Both sides in this argument agree that the fundamental issue is how the education system should be organised and regulated, not primarily about the position of Islam in modern British society.

Contributory and contextual factors

Each narrative outlined above intertwines with contextual factors such as the following.

1. Uncertainty and anxiety

In common with all other local authorities, Birmingham City Council has lost many senior staff in recent years, and therefore much expertise, knowledge and wisdom amongst senior officers. In consequence it has been unable to deal with the Trojan Horse affair with appropriate insight, professionalism and sense of urgency, and unable to give support and advice when and where these have been most needed.

Partly or largely as a consequence of central government policy, there is much uncertainty and anxiety about accountability and legitimate authority in the Birmingham education system, as in most or all other local systems. Particularly the academisation programme creates or contributes to instability, competition and mutual distrust, and to an absence of middle-tier support and guidance. It is when human beings are uncertain and anxious, and when they do not have access to reliable and supportive advice, that they are prone to spread and give credence to notions that in more stable times they would dismiss out of hand.

2. Electoral politics

Anti-Muslim hostility advances the electoral prospects of certain political parties and individual politicians, and in consequence narratives about the Trojan Horse affair have been and are affected by campaigning for local and European elections on 22 May 2014, and for the general election in UK in 2015. For example, there are politicians who stress as part of their party's appeal to voters that Britain is a Christian country and that Muslims should accept this ('Muslims must accept Britain's Christian values, says former Home Secretary' – Daily Telegraph headline, 24 April), and they link this claim to the Trojan Horse affair.

Also, competing narratives about the Trojan Horse affair are affected by tensions and disagreements between different factions and interests within each political party, and in party-political disputes about the value of academies and free schools, and the respective responsibilities of central and local government.

3. Other politics

In addition to electoral politics the Trojan Horse is affected by relationships and power struggles between central and local government, and within local

government between councillors and officers on the one hand and headteachers and teacher unions on the other.

Further, there are tensions and disagreements about the role, independence and future of Ofsted, and in relation to the expectations which different interest groups have of Ofsted. These tensions exist within the coalition government, and between the Department for Education and Ofsted, and within Ofsted itself.

4. Rivalries in and between communities

There are rivalries amongst Muslim organisations, both nationally and locally, for state patronage, recognition, grants and funding. These can be affected and reinforced by theological and denominational differences within Islam, for example between Barelvis and Deobandis, and can make it difficult for Muslims to speak out with one voice about matters such as the Trojan Horse affair, and the issues that it raises.

5. Personal careers

There are individuals in Birmingham whose personal career prospects are advanced or assisted by the Trojan Horse affair, and/or whose personal grievances are apparently vindicated by it. Also, of course, there are people whose careers are being severely damaged.

6. Violence

There are real dangers both of violent racism and of violent radicalisation.

NOTES AND COMMENTS

(Please note: The full titles of all the articles mentioned in the following notes, plus also their dates and hyperlinks to them, are listed on later pages.)

The dominant narrative

The Trojan Horse affair entered the media on Sunday 2 March with an article by Richard Kerbaj, the paper's security correspondent, and Sian Griffiths. Most of the article was then recycled verbatim by several national papers, and in the Birmingham press, on the following two days. For over a week it was the dominant story throughout the media.

The article's title, 'Islamist plot to take over schools', contained inverted commas to signal that the story might not be true, and the introductory sub-heading similarly indicated that the plot was alleged not certain: 'Leaked papers reveal an alleged plan to target ailing schools, force out heads and convert classes to Islamic principles'. Such nuances did not, however, feature at all prominently in the article which followed, nor in any of the many articles in other papers which recycled it.

An article by Dominic Kennedy and co-authors in The Times (11 March) pointed out that the document contained serious errors, and that at least some of it must

therefore be a forgery. There was a broadly similar story by Helen Pidd in The Guardian, though the headline for this referred to a 'possible' hoax, not to a probable or certain one. This drew a wry comment on the Islamophobia Watch website: 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion possibly a hoax'. Others who likened the document to the Protocols included Tom Bennett. Someone named in the document, Tahir Alam, issued a statement saying the document was a forgery.

The first and most obvious sign that the document was a forgery was its use of the phrase 'Trojan Horse' to summarise the strategy which it claimed to be proposing. The term is fairly common in anti-Muslim writings but not at all likely to be used by Muslims, least of all by any who hold the kinds of view which the document caricatures. Thus, for example, Anders Behring Breivik described Islam as a Trojan Horse in a passage in which he quoted with approval an author who had written that 'in Europe, the Muslim Brotherhood discovered a unique opportunity: Democracy. The democratic system leaves room for freedom of religion and freedom of speech, and finances religious communities and religious organisations. This has been utilised by the Muslim Brotherhood to infiltrate the Muslim communities, recruit members and build the Islamist networks that have become so visible lately.' Breivik then added: 'Whereas bin Laden uses bombs, al-Qaradawi [a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood] exploits democracy as a Trojan horse.' The same general point was made by Sam Solomon and Elias Al Magdisi in their anti-Muslim book Modern Day Trojan Horse, published in 2009. This was endorsed by, among others, Geert Wilders, who wrote: 'I hope every person in the Western world reads it, including the sleeping political elite. This book should bring about a much needed awakening."

The term 'Trojan Horse' to describe so-called Islamist extremism also appeared as a chapter heading in Michael Gove's book Celsius 7/7, published in 2006.

Since the document leaked to the Sunday Times contained many errors and howlers, and since even a cursory textual analysis showed it could not have been written by the person who claimed to be its author, media reportage increasingly recognised that it was a forgery. The media continued to claim, however, that there was a plot, or a series of plots. This claim was endorsed by Labour MPs such as Tristram Hunt, Khalid Mahmood and Jack Straw and by the general secretary of the national union of schoolmasters and union of women teachers (NASUWT). But from mid-April onwards the dominant narrative began to mutate into a version emphasising terrorism and violent extremism, as distinct from conservatism and so-called fundamentalism.

Thus on Sunday 20 April Richard Kerbaj and Sian Griffiths reported in the Sunday Times that they had been told by an official at the Department for Education that, in the Department's view, running schools on Islamic principles is likely to lead to a rise in terrorist extremism. 'Religious conservatism is getting in the way of learning and a balanced curriculum,' declared the official, who also explained that 'extreme religious conservatism often acts as an entry to later problems. A child who is brought up, age eight, nine, ten, believing that you should segregate the sexes and hand out Islamic textbooks is more likely to be radicalised in later life.' The same official, or perhaps a colleague from the same office, briefed Mark Wallace at Conservative Home along the same lines, and this claim also appeared in a blog by Paul Dale (24 April), who wrote of the 'possibility … that conditions

exist under which extremists could infiltrate classrooms with a view to turning young people into tomorrow's terrorists'.

Dale indicated that his attention had been drawn to a toolkit for schools on preventing terrorism which was published in 2008 by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (as the DfE was known at that time), and he quoted a statement that Ofsted would be working with the Department to 'ensure that inspectors have the necessary knowledge and expertise to determine whether extremist and intolerant beliefs are being promoted in a school'. Whether inspectors indeed have the necessary knowledge and expertise remains to be seen. The early signs reported in the press, however, are that they do not (see, for example, the piece by Richard Adams in The Guardian, 20 April).

Towards a counter narrative

The principal strands of a counter narrative are sketched in the first section of this paper under the headings of 'The needs of young Muslims' and 'Anti-Muslim hostility'. The two strands do not contradict each other. On the contrary, they complement and reinforce each other. It is possible, however, for any one person to emphasise one of them more, or far more, than the other.

The strand relating to the needs of young Muslims is explicated at length in the literature listed in a later section of this paper. The strand relating to anti-Muslim hostility is similarly explicated later in a select bibliography. With particular regard to the Trojan Horse affair it is articulated in pieces by Seumas Milne (24 April) and Assad Baig (25 April).

A complementary narrative - accountability in the education system

Some of the media reportage has concentrated on issues of accountability and regulation much more than on matters relating to Islam and so-called Islamism. This is a complementary narrative in the sense that it can co-exist either with the dominant narrative outlined above or with the counter narrative. If a politician or journalist talking about accountability does not explicitly indicate their position in relation to the dominant narrative and the counter narrative it is normally reasonable to assume they embrace the dominant narrative.

Articles and blogposts about the affair in Birmingham

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http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/news/uk_news/Education/article1407107.e ce

Khan, M G (28 March) The Trojan Horse is being used to destabilise Muslim majority schools by galvanising Ofsted, Times Educational Supplement 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

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http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/mar/13/alleged-islamic-plot-birmingham-schools-possible-hoax?CMP=twt_fd

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- (a) The needs of young Muslims

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