

## **FEAR AND LOATHING: THE POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN RELATION TO MUSLIMS AND ISLAM IN THE BRITISH CONTEMPORARY SETTING**

### **Abstract**

Following the attacks on the World Trade Centre in 2001 ('9/11'), the *Los Angeles Times* wrote that the 'next big thing' was likely to be fear. This paper seeks to consider how the notion of fear and threat has influenced and shaped British political discourse in relation to Muslims and Islam – especially 'home-grown' Muslims and Islam - over the past decade or so. Considering the broad spectrum of British politics, including both mainstream and fringe, this paper begins with a consideration of the British National Party (BNP) and the way in which it has grown and gained electoral success on the back of overtly anti-Muslim, anti-Islamic campaigns. Considering the influence of this on the establishment and development of the English Defence League, the discourse of other political actors including the New Labour Government is explored to highlight the closing of difference between the left and right wings of British political discourse. To conclude, Martin Barker's theories of 'new racism' are explored as a means of understanding the changes in the British political spaces before conclusions are drawn that highlight what might be evidence of a hardening of ideas and attitudes about Muslims and Islam more widely.

**Key words:** British National Party, English Defence League, Islam, Islamophobia, Muslims.

### **Introduction**

In the preface to *Culture of Fear: Risk-taking and the Morality of Low Expectation*, Frank Furedi notes that following the attacks on the World Trade Centre in 2001 ('9/11'), the *Los Angeles Times* wrote that the 'next big thing' was likely to be fear (Furedi, 2002: vii). As he went on, in today's Western societies the defining feature of this fear will be the 'belief that humanity is confronted by powerful destructive forces that threaten our everyday existence' (*ibid*). One of the consequences of this would be that any problem or challenge that subsequently emerged had the capability of being transformed into a matter of survival. Fear would continue to feed itself, creating the disposition to speculate and exaggerate about ever greater fears and threats that appear to be lurk-

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ing just around the corner. Furedi goes on to illustrate the unquestioned acceptance that accompanies these processes of fear and threat by arguing that despite the fact that British newspapers were emblazoned with sensationalist headlines asking 'Is this the end of the world?' or declaring 'Apocalypse' a day after 9/11, few even thought about even the merest potential for exaggeration. On the contrary, the inference of fear and threat behind the headlines – and more so the wider discourse – were consumed as unquestionable realities.

It is possible that the same occurred after 7 July 2005 ('7/7') when four young men set off a series of bombs on the London public transport system. With newspaper headlines reflecting those following 9/11 – including some that referred to the events as 'our 9/11' – much of the ensuing debate since has taken the notion of fear and threat in a somewhat different direction. As well as focusing on the Muslim heritage of the four young men, more was made of the fact that they were British born. Or, as this has become more widely referred to in both social and political parlance, 'home-grown'. Unlike 9/11, the perpetrators – and by consequence others like them – had emerged from within British society. As some put it in the media, the 'enemy' was now within. And with this closer proximity, so too was both the fear and threat much closer also. Bolstered by the botched attacks a fortnight later, a whole raft of other 'home-grown' activities have increased this fear, the fear of Muslims and Islam in Britain and the threat they are perceived to be posing. From an attack on Glasgow airport through numerous 'terror raids' to the plot to behead a British Muslim serviceman, these and indeed other events and incidents have heightened suspicion and mistrust, deepened the sense of fear, increased anxiety, and reinforced all that is seen to be 'normal' about Muslims: one where an 'us' and 'them' dichotomy has ensued. This 'us' and 'them' mentality suggesting that what is normal is that Muslims neither want to be nor will they ever be able to be a part of who 'we' believe we are. Consequently, everything Muslim and everything Islam becomes established and embellished – and indeed accepted – as oppositional and threatening to 'our' culture, 'our' values, 'our' institutions and 'our' way of life. Muslims and Islam have therefore become, to reference Furedi, the destructive force threatening 'our' survival.

And, in line with Furedi's observation about fear having the ability to speculate and exaggerate, so the reverberations from the impact of both 9/11 and 7/7 have conformed. But unlike the political response in the US to 9/11, where the threat was seen to be and indeed remains one that is largely shaped and determined within an international context – the burgeoning 'war on terror' being a case in point – in the UK, the political response has been one that, in line with the proximity of the perceived threat, has had much greater 'home-grown' focus and impact. Consequently, the recognition of home-grown – a recognition that is not always overt or obvious – has become implicated in various debates and policies that have impacted upon such issues as cohesion, integration, identity, immigration and citizenship amongst others. For some, the home-grown bombers exposed the failure of British society and its multicultural social model (Allen, 2007a), a precursor to the more recent political mantra of needing to repair a 'broken Britain'. For some with more extreme views, the impact of the home-grown bomber was evidence that Britain was finally reaping what it had sown and was now a matter of safeguarding our existence. And because of this, the political need to respond became more pressing, more forceful and, more worryingly for some, an act

of self-defence: self-defence against those seen to be posing the greatest threat.

This paper seeks to consider how this has been manifested in political discourse, exploring the way in which the notion of fear and threat – and at times how Muslims and Islam have been referred to in terms of being a destructive force to our survival – has influenced and shaped British political discourse in relation to Muslims and Islam over the past decade or so. Cutting across the breadth of the British political spectrum, this paper will consider how this discourse has resulted in unprecedented support for extreme far-right political parties as well as how this same discourse has been reflected in the discourse of the mainstream of British politics, where Muslims and Islam have become highly recognisable and highly important entities, as much political partners as indeed political scapegoats. In focusing on the way in which Muslims and Islam have been spoken about and referred to, some theoretical underpinning will also be put forward, in particular how the contemporary political discourse relating to Muslims and Islam is similar to the discourse identified as ‘new racism’ in the late twentieth century British political setting. In conclusion, this paper will reflect on how political discourse has had wider socio-political ramifications, not only feeding into but also being symptomatic of the sense of fear and threat that has characterised Western society since 9/11.

This paper draws upon the findings from three pieces of research and the narratives that have underpinned and indeed characterised them. The first project relates to doctoral studies that undertaken at the University of Birmingham and were funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council to explore the language of Islamophobia in the British context, most prominently following the events of 9/11 (Allen, 2006). The second project was commissioned by the Greater London Authority shortly after the events of 7/7 as a means of exploring the impact of the ‘normal’ representation of Muslims and Islam in the British media on the relationships between different communities in London (Allen, 2007b). The third and final project was undertaken on behalf of the National Association of Muslim Police that sought to consider, amongst other issues, the impact of public and social policy in relation to Muslims and Islam on wider British society, not least in terms of the perceptions that exist about Muslims and Islam in the social setting (Allen, 2010). Each project has featured methodologies that have a strong emphasis on discourse analysis and documentary content analyses. One of the benefits of this is that as McCulloch notes, content and discourse methodologies have been largely neglected over the past two decades since researchers have tended to favour methods where they themselves are actively involved in producing the data for their own purposes (McCulloch, 2004). Drawing upon a broad range of different analyses encompassed by these three projects, this paper will not only contribute to the gap identified by McCulloch but so too will it utilise three separate and independent projects to construct a linear narrative that improves understanding and engagement with political discourses in relation to Muslims and Islam. This paper will make a useful contribution to the existing body of work in relation to Muslims and Islam in the UK at the same time as adding to less developed areas of research that focus on the politics of religion and faith in the contemporary British setting, the politicisation of Muslims and Islam, Islamophobia, and the politics of fear amongst others.

### 'Islam out of Britain': The British National Party

The idea that Muslims and Islam present a real and direct threat to 'our' culture, 'our' values, 'our' institutions and 'our' way of life has found a voice across the entire spectrum of British politics. Indeed at times, the voices emerging from both the left and right wings of the British political spectrum have been difficult to differentiate (Allen, 2005). Most successful however in utilising this for political currency has been the far-right, sometimes described neo-Nazi British National Party (BNP). Following the disturbances across a handful of towns in the north of England – Bradford, Burnley and Oldham - in the summer of 2001 that largely involved young men of Pakistani heritage and by reasoned assumption Muslim also, the BNP identified a loophole that existed in British equalities legislation at the time that failed to afford protection against discrimination on the basis of religion or faith. Whilst protection was afforded under case law to those from within mono-ethnic religions – Jews and Sikhs for instance – due to their subsequent legal recognition as being 'races, the same was not true for multi-ethnic religions such as Islam, Buddhism and Christianity amongst others. Recognising the opportunity this presented – and more importantly, the fact that it was completely within the law – the BNP became increasingly sophisticated and nuanced in the way in which it spoke about and referred to Muslims and Islam. Overtly inciting, encouraging provocation and garnering division, the BNP routinely employed language and images that drew upon the fear of and threat posed by Muslims and Islam. Bolstered by the events of 9/11 less than a month after the northern disturbances, the BNP launched its campaign *Islam out of Britain*. Declaring the clearest of objectives, the BNP sought to expose "the threat Islam and Muslims pose to Britain and British society"<sup>2</sup>.

Within weeks the BNP were widely distributing a leaflet entitled, *The truth about I.S.L.A.M.* Using the acronym 'Intolerance, Slaughter, Looting, Arson and Molestation of women' the leaflet set out a range of highly inflammatory justifications for hating Muslims. As it put it, 'to find out what Islam really stands for, all you have to do is look at a copy of the Koran [sic], and see for yourself...Islam really does stand for Intolerance, Slaughter, Looting, Arson and Molestation of Women'. By selectively quoting from the Qur'an, the BNP painted the most despicable picture of Muslims and Islam declaring that, 'no-one dares to tell the truth about Islam and the way that it threatens our democracy, traditional freedoms and identity'. Having previously been dismissed as little more than a shabbily organised group of thugs and football hooligans by both the political mainstream and wider British society, the BNP soon began to recognise the benefits of accentuating the threat posed by Muslims and Islam.

By rooting this in the context of a pseudo-Islamic theology, the BNP set out an argument that justified what demarcated 'them' from 'us' or 'Muslim' from 'kafir' [sic] as they put it. For them, not wanting to be a part of who 'we' are was something that was required of Muslims by their religion, by Islam. Because of this, it was – according to the BNP – entirely normal for Muslims to want to threaten and ultimately overthrow all that was British and Western: our everyday existence. What was interesting – and somewhat unprecedented – was how the BNP recruited a small number of fringe British Sikh and Hindu groups to support them. In doing so, the BNP argued that they

<sup>2</sup> This leaflet is no longer in general circulation.

were putting forward an 'insiders' point of view. For them, an 'insider' meant someone that was like the majority of Muslims in the Britain, namely that Sikhs and Hindus were 'Asian' also. Because of this, the message that the insiders put forward – one that was gleaned from centuries of experience in the Indian subcontinent – was seen by the BNP as having much greater legitimacy and understanding. As with the BNP quoting from the Qur'an in its campaign materials, they were seeking to justify their claims with sources that showed the 'truth' about Muslims and Islam.

Steadily growing in size at the same time as learning how to refine its message, the BNP was bolstered by the socio-political recognition afforded to the threat from 'home-grown' and all that this entailed following 7/7. In doing so, they further exacerbated the fear and threat that they had first tapped into following 9/11 especially now that the same ideas and accusations were finding a way into the mainstream of the British political arena. Focusing on the alleged differences between the 'aboriginal' communities – a term once employed by the BNP to describe 'real' Anglo-Saxon Brits – and Muslims, within days of the London bombings the Party had produced a leaflet showing the bombed out carcass of the bus in Tavistock Square. Emblazoned with a message that intoned 'we told you so', the leaflet ended with: 'Maybe now it's time to start listening to the BNP'. Shortly after in early 2006, the BNP produced another leaflet that placed a picture of one the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad from the *Danish Jyllands-Posten* newspaper alongside a photo of a cartoons-inspired protest in London where a number of extremely aggressive looking young British Muslims held some of the most despicable placards that urged violence against those who insulted Islam. Turning the debate on its head, the BNP quite simply asked, 'Which do you find offensive?'

Despite some public but mainly political outcry at the inappropriateness of the leaflets, that same year the BNP fielded around 350 candidates in municipal elections across the country. Under a campaign entitled 'Islam Referendum Day', they asked, 'Are you concerned about the growth of Islam in Britain?'. Unexpectedly, the BNP made unprecedented gains: 33 candidates were declared winners with a further 70 ending up in second place. However it was in Barking and Dagenham, a highly diverse and densely populated area of east London, where its success was most notable. Winning 11 of the 13 seats it contested, the BNP became the first far-right party in British history to be the official opposition in a local council chamber. Following their success, at the first meeting of the Council in May 2006, the BNP's first act was to try and force through an amendment to the nature and emphasis of Barking and Dagenham's commitment to anti-racism. That same evening outside the underground station in Barking, a man of Afghan origin was repeatedly stabbed by four men who left a St George's Cross flag draped across his body before running off and leaving him to die (Bragg 2006). Four years later in local elections held in May 2010, all of the BNP's councillors were voted out of the Council.

Essential to the BNP's growth was the propagation and exploitation of the alleged threat posed by Muslims – especially 'home-grown' Muslims – to 'our' survival. Most interesting though was how widely this message was accepted across all Britain's diverse communities. As research undertaken by Democratic Audit at the University of Essex showed, in those parts of England where the BNP was targeting most of its resources, around one in four voters had considered voting for them. In some parts of

London, this figure was shown to be around one in five (Peter et al., 2006). Emanating entirely from the success of their openly anti-Muslim campaigns, the BNP found a much greater, near country-wide quasi-legitimacy that saw their popularity mushroom on the basis that they were able to offer a genuine political alternative. This was most notable in the fact that the largest swing of voters to the BNP came from traditional Labour voters, moving from the left of the political spectrum to the hard right. The BNP capitalised on this and found themselves with elected councillors from Grays in the South of England, through Sandwell and Dudley in the Midlands, to its first stronghold in Burnley in the north. Before the 2010 General Election, it was estimated that the Party had around 56 local councillors. More significantly however was when in 2008 it won one of 25 seats in the London Assembly having gained approximately 5.3% of the capital's vote. Then in 2009, it made even further inroads by winning two seats in the European Parliament: 9.8% of the vote in Yorkshire and Humber, 8.0% in the North West. Despite the more recent failure of the BNP in general and local elections in 2010, they are far from a spent force as some observers are suggesting. Underestimating how far they have come in less than a decade and how resonant its messages have become might still be extremely disastrous.

### **'Black and White Unite': Beyond the BNP**

Without any doubt whatsoever, the success of the BNP was through its clear and acknowledged shift towards a more explicit anti-Muslim, anti-Islam agenda. As the Party's leader, Nick Griffin openly acknowledged to a group of activists a few years ago at the height of its effectiveness, 'We should be positioning ourselves to take advantage for our own political ends of the growing wave of public hostility to Islam currently being whipped up by the mass media' (Griffin, 2007). And witnessing the success of the BNP, other far-right groups sought to capitalise on the socio-political climate with groups such as the National Front, Combat 18, the White Wolves and the White Nationalist Party all having developed – albeit far less successfully – similar anti-Muslim agendas and rhetoric. And this can be seen in the discourse and campaigning of those political parties that exist on the right of the mainstream of the political mainstream. Take for instance the UK Independence Party ('UKIP'). At the local level, UKIP councillors have adopted and supported anti-Muslim, anti-Islamic campaigns that were begun by those from within the far-right. In Dudley North in the West Midlands, not only did a UKIP councillor replace a BNP equivalent, but so too did he take up and further a highly vociferous and divisive campaign to oppose the building of a new 'super-mosque' on wasteland on the outskirts of the town. As a marker of the campaign's success, a petition of more than 22,000 names was submitted to Dudley Metropolitan Council, the matter was discussed in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords, and more recently, the issue has appeared on the Prime Minister's *10 Downing Street* website.

More recently, UKIP officials have been courting the support of the far right, none more so than the English Defence League (EDL) through one of its candidates, Magnus Nielsen, offering to speak at their rallies. Of all those political entities espousing an overt anti-Muslim, anti-Islamic discourse it is the relatively new EDL that has grown most rapidly in the past year or so. Formed in June 2009, the group claim they were

needed as a response to the frustration felt by ordinary people at the lack of action by the British Government against what it describes on its website as 'extremist Muslim preachers and organisations'<sup>3</sup>. Whilst opponents have suggested – somewhat inaccurately – that the EDL are mere 'foot-soldiers' of the BNP, the group are far more specific about their aims and causes. For them, they believe they are a necessary bulwark to Britain's 'politically correct culture', a culture that panders to what the EDL describe as 'Jihadist preachers'. In evidencing such claims, the EDL cites the fact that nativity plays have been banned in some schools, that halal meat is the only meat option served in many schools, that Englishness has become marginalised, and that the national flag – the St George's cross – has been banned by some local authorities. But it was the sight of a handful of British Muslims vociferously and offensively protesting when the Royal Anglian Regiment returned to Luton from duty in Iraq that was, as the EDL put it, 'the final straw'. In other words, the EDL believe Islamic extremism to be a destructive force threatening the existence of Englishness.

Claiming they comprise ordinary, non-racist citizens of England and supporters who have had enough of being treated as second-class citizens to the 'Jihadis in our own country'<sup>4</sup>, the EDL in less than a year have been able to mobilise significant numbers to march in towns and cities across England. Most recently, the EDL were able to rally around 2,000 people to march in Dudley: a march they claim to be their largest to date. Originally borne out of the loosely based 'football hooligan' website *Casuals United*<sup>5</sup>, it is difficult to know exactly how large or well supported the EDL are. Likewise, it is unclear at the moment whether they will – like the BNP before them – to enter into more formal political processes. What is particularly interesting and quite unique about the EDL – and reflected in the League's origins in football – is that they not only routinely march behind banners that state 'Black and white unite against Islamic extremism' but so too are the people marching behind them of black, white and mixed heritages. Unlike other far-right organisations, the EDL are proud of their diversity. They regularly have black and Asian speakers at their rallies and have a person of Sikh heritage in their leadership. Going even further beyond the norms of far-right politics, the EDL also march – somewhat controversially – carrying Israeli flags and have a Gay Division within its ranks<sup>6</sup>. Undeniably – and proudly overtly – the uniting factor for the EDL is its anti-Muslim, anti-Islamic message, one where 'all races and faiths [can] join us in this campaign to awaken our sleeping Government to face up to and deal with the Jihad in our country, which threatens the very foundations of the freedoms won so dearly for us by past generations'<sup>7</sup>.

Whilst the EDL would argue that it is only 'extremists' and 'Jihadis' that they oppose, it is clear that the message of the EDL resonates with the wider political climate and clearly taps into the discourse of Muslims and Islam posing a threat. Building upon this premise, much of the EDL's discourse reflects the ideas put forward by Furedi, referring to 'preachers of hate', 'vile specimens' and 'Muslim extremists' as evidence of

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3 The English Defence League, About the EDL.

4 *ibid.*

5 Casuals United, No title. <http://casualsunited.webs.com>.

6 Casuals United, No title, <http://casualsunited.wordpress.com/category/edl-gay-division>.

7 English Defence League, About the EDL.

the threat posed. They talk about Muslims 'spreading' across 'our country' whilst referring to the 'patriotic people' of the English nation being besieged and overwhelmed. Without any doubt, the discourse of the EDL is one that reflects that of the BNP and others albeit tailored to be more inclusive and by consequence, more relevant to contemporary Britain's inherent diversity. And it is with this that the message and success of the EDL comes as a timely counter-balance to the relative impotence of the BNP in the 2010 elections. The growing support for the more forthright methods of the EDL are potentially more worrying in that it would seem that those supporting such political campaigns are moving more towards direct action and involvement than they are traditional political systems and structures. As regards the EDL, it will be interesting to see how the organisation develops and whether it will seek to maximise its political impact in other ways especially as the effectiveness of the BNP would seem to have waned.

### **Between Left and Right: From Whining Maniacs to Barriers to Integration**

Despite the message of the far-right being more obvious and overt, one key observation to have emerged since 9/11 is how the discourse of the political right and left when concerned with Muslims and Islam has become much less differentiable in terms of language, message and meaning. Shortly after 9/11, the centre-left former Home Secretary of Tony Blair's New Labour government, David Blunkett, decried British Muslims in Bradford who were peacefully campaigning against what they perceived to be the harsh sentencing of their friends and family convicted of involvement in the 2001 disturbances. In doing so, Blunkett openly called them 'whining maniacs'. A few years later, Blunkett gained significant media airtime when he expressed his endorsement of what he claimed were the more 'rational' claims of the assassinated Pim Fortuyn, suggesting that Muslims should readily accept and assimilate into 'our culture' and 'our ways'. He went on to suggest that immigrants and asylum seekers – a group that were at the time largely interchangeable and indistinguishable from Muslims – were 'swamping our' schools' (Allen, 2003: 36). For some, Blunkett was deliberately echoing suggestions made by the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher some twenty or so years beforehand, a formative moment in the emergence of 'new racist' political discourses in the British political arena.

Maybe Blunkett's statement – like Thatcher's before it – was a precursor to the not-so-'new racism' that has been evident in the mainstream of the British political spaces in more recent times. Despite Blunkett having left the front bench of British politics in the mid-2000s, numerous other members of the New Labour government have spoken about Muslims and Islam in similar ways, ways that have also resonated with notions of fear and threat evident in the rhetoric of the far-right. For example in his first public speech to a Muslim audience after becoming Home Secretary, John Reid addressed a community group in east London by calling for Muslim parents to look out for the 'tell-tale signs of extremism' in their children. As he put it, 'our fight is not with Muslims generally...[but a] struggle against extremism', a statement similar but preceding the EDL. He went on, 'There is no nice way of saying this. These fanatics are looking to groom and brainwash children, including your children, for suicide bomb-



ings, grooming them to kill themselves in order to murder others<sup>8</sup>. At the event, Reid was heckled by the highly mediatised and well-known Abu Izzadeen, someone who came to fame as a result of widely commending the 7/7 suicide bombers in the media. Shouting at Reid, Izzadeen decried former Prime Minister Tony Blair as a murderer and accused the British government of killing Muslims all over the world.

The event was unsurprisingly shown across all the television networks as an example of what Reid was trying to convey in his message to Muslims. Yet within hours of the incident, many were asking questions about the complicity of both Reid and Izzadeen in staging the event. Many were asking how a well-known and allegedly violent 'extremist' from an organisation that had been proscribed by the Government and who was very well known to Special Branch and senior police officers, had been allowed within touching distance – and for a considerable period of time – of the Home Secretary. Following Izzadeen being given airtime by the BBC the next morning in which he called for the establishment of sharia law in the Islamic state of Britain, race commentator Darcus Howe voiced the opinion of many: 'the Sky News clash was staged by Reid and his cohorts at the Home Office. They organised the meeting, Abu Izzadeen was invited in advance – his performance guaranteed – and the press was alerted to film and report the confrontation' (Howe, 2006). If true, then it would seem that the event was staged to express – through the 'performance guaranteed' – a very specific message: that Muslims of Izzadeen's ilk were a real and tangible threat that should be duly feared. And given that the audience were made up of ordinary Muslims, maybe the message was also that the threat posed could appear any time, any place and from anywhere within Britain's Muslim communities.

As with Blunkett and Reid, so others from the political left contributed ideas and meanings that have reflected, reinforced or replicated the discourse about Muslims and Islam from within the far-right. For example, ministers at the Department of Education issued guidelines to lecturers and university staff urging them to 'spy' on both Muslim and 'Muslim-looking' students who they suspected might be actively involved in Islamic extremism or prone to supporting terrorist violence. This was put forward on the belief that university campuses had become 'fertile recruiting grounds' (Dodd, 2006). Elsewhere, the former Communities Secretary Ruth Kelly announced that Muslim organisations that refused to defend core British values and failed to be 'pro-active' in the fight against extremism were to lose access to millions of pounds of Government funding. Using potentially loaded language, Kelly stated that a '*fundamental* rebalancing' was required of Muslims and their organisations (Helm, 2006). Sometime before, Kelly had also called for Islamic schools that were isolationist to be immediately closed down<sup>9</sup>.

However in a period that appeared to repeatedly focus on the 'problem' of Britain's Muslim communities, not least the threat they posed, it was the former Foreign Secretary and Leader of the Commons Jack Straw that gained most attention by suggesting that Muslim women who wore the niqab – the full face covering – were making relations between communities more difficult, a theme later taken up by the UKIP Leader Nigel Farage in the Party's campaign for the 2010 elections. Given the

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8 BBC Online, Reid heckled during Muslim speech.

9 BBC Online, Close extremist schools – Kelly.

significant debate about Muslims in the period of Straw's comments, the BBC News' Home Editor Mark Easton argued that Straw's comments were 'not some reflective little observation from Jack Straw about the protocols of MP/ constituent meetings in a multicultural world...' but instead '...a quite deliberate foray into what is becoming a real debate within Westminster'<sup>10</sup>: a debate about the problem of Muslims and Islam that had begun and was being driven by those such as the BNP elsewhere. As well as opinion polls that showed overwhelming support for Straw's comments, various other political players voiced their support not least Blair, Gordon Brown, Harriet Harman, and Bill Rammell amongst others. In doing so, so the political discourse and the messages taken from it categorically reinforced the idea that Muslims and Islam were something that was causing 'us' problems: a problem that was threatening 'our' culture, 'our' values, 'our' way of life.

The ongoing political discourse about Muslims and Islam has since continued to be as intensive and inflammatory. Since 7/7, the shooting of the Brazilian national Jean Charles de Menezes for suspicion of being a suspected suicide bomber and the raid of a house in Forest Gate, London where an innocent Muslim man – 23 year old Mohammed Abdul Kahar – was shot due to being suspected of developing a chemical weapon vest have shown just how severe the consequences of this intense can be. Add to this numerous terror raids, allegations of various terrorist plots, burgeoning anti-terror legislation, the holding of a number of Muslims without trial in London's Belmarsh prison, and a range of other widely debated conspiracies and it is clear that this has caused some significant social impact also. Considering the breadth of political discourse, a somewhat pan-political response is evident where fear and threat are integral and indeed almost necessary aspects in all discursive undertakings. The validity of such claims naturally remain open to debate, although what cannot be denied is the fact that numerous events, incidents and undertakings – as well as the events of 9/11 and 7/7 amongst others – have all contributed to a climate where the immediacy of recognition and acknowledgement of Muslim and Islamic difference, the growing receptivity to anti-Muslim ideas and expressions about Muslims and Islam posing a threat, and the sense of justification that is recurrently evident in being fearful and normatively against Muslims and Islam has increasingly been seen to make sense.

### **Fear and Threat: The discourse of New Racism**

Theoretically, the political discourse in relation to Muslims and Islam contemporarily reflects that identified by Martin Barker in terms of the emergence of a new political discourse in the 1970s (Barker , 1981). Defining the phenomenon as 'new racism', Barker saw a shift occurring where culturally focused markers, rather than biological – pseudo or otherwise – or somatic markers were being preferred as markers upon which discriminatory processes were being perpetuated. For him, this was first evident in the political discourse of the Conservative Party following its 1974 election defeat. What became paramount in this particular discourse was the disproportionate focus on issues such as immigration and the allegation that this would somehow eventually destroy the cultural homogeneity of the British nation and ultimately, its indigenus

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<sup>10</sup> BBC Online, Analysis: Straw's veil debate.

population's identity, values and so on. More simply, immigrants were seen to be threatening to the very existence of 'British-ness'. As Miles and Brown later described it, Barker's particular understanding 'formulated a notion of "Other" as naturally different in cultural terms, with a natural 'home' outside Britain' (Miles and Brown, 2003: 62), something that clearly alludes and resonates with the way in which Muslims and Islam are spoken about today. Following the election of the Conservative government in the late 1970s, Barker suggests that this shift became more pronounced. Unlike older forms of discrimination and racism, 'new racism' simultaneously exaggerated difference whilst using that same difference in a far more nuanced way. Consequently, markers of difference were not used to underpin explicit hatred and hostility. Instead they were exaggerated to suggest that they were so different to the norm that they were completely incompatible with. And in doing so, they inadvertently challenged and threatened it.

Having dispensed with biological determinants, new racism – or 'cultural racism' as it has since also become known – became largely rooted in frames of inclusion and exclusion, specifying who and what may legitimately belong to a particular national, ethnic or other population as well as determining what that population's norms might be, simultaneously proposing and advancing quasi-justifications for the segregation, exclusion and banishment of those whose origin, parentage, religion, culture or so on not only make them different but so too assign them elsewhere. Through this process which re-asserts the 'Other', an imagined 'Self' thus ensues that appreciates Otherness but to the extent where it is considered better for Others and 'their cultures' to remain separate so as to preserve themselves and maintain their own traditions. As Barker concluded, the consequences of new racism are that 'our' political and cultural systems are seen to be superior through its difference to the ways of the Other, readily incorporating normative 'ways of life' that include language, beliefs, values, customs and religions; that there is such a strong attachment to 'our' way of life that creates boundaries between 'them' and 'us', founded upon difference rather than inferiority; that other cultures are in some ways pathologically interpreted and understood in that they cause 'problems' for 'us' through the notion of a genuine fear and/or threat; and that all of this culminates as 'common sense', justified and perfectly natural and in no way racist whatsoever (*ibid*). As such, it is difference that poses the greatest threat. In many ways therefore, it is the difference of Muslims and Islam – perceived or otherwise – that in the post-9/11, post-7/7 socio-political setting has found the greatest currency and does, by consequence, pose the greatest threat.

Back in 1997, a groundbreaking report by the Runnymede Trust, entitled *Islamophobia: a challenge for us all*<sup>11</sup> suggested that the need to be aware of the processes and discourses circulating in the wider public and political spaces was vital to understand how they feed into and reinforce messages that are anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic. In setting out the nature of what it described as 'Islamophobia', the report noted how Muslims were seen as separate and other, 'not having any aims or values in common' with Britain's non-Muslims (*ibid*, 5). In other words, the report suggested that Muslims were seen to be a 'them' that are inherently and irrevocably not a part of 'our way of life'. In addition, it went on to add that Islam and Muslims were seen to be 'violent,

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11 Runnymede Trust: Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, 1997.

aggressive....' and more pertinently, '...threatening' (*ibid*). From what has been noted here, little if indeed anything would appear to have changed in the decade and a half since that report was commissioned. That all Muslims and Islam without differentiation are becoming increasingly understood in frames that identify them as a threat to all that British society holds dear, it may be worth remembering a further observation from the report. Noting that anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic sentiment and feeling was far from being seen as problematic, it suggested that in future years these same sentiments and feelings could become increasingly naturalised and normative: invisible maybe. As the report concluded:

The expression of anti-Muslim ideas and sentiments is becoming increasingly seen as respectable. It is a natural, taken-for-granted ingredient of the commonsense world of millions of people every day. . . Islamophobic discourse, sometimes blatant but frequently subtle and coded, is part of the fabric of everyday life in modern Britain. (*ibid*, 10-11).

## Conclusion

Whether what has and indeed continues to be played out in recent years in the British political spaces through the discourse of various different political allegiances and groupings is Islamophobic remains questionable. However, there has been a trend across the breadth of the British political spectrum that has brought the discourse and messages underpinning them to be much closer in sentiment and meaning. And some of the consequences of this are evident. According to this year's British Social Attitudes Survey, just over half the population now believe that Britain is deeply divided along religious lines<sup>12</sup>. Around 45% also believe that religious diversity is having a negative impact on society. It is worth stressing that in stating these findings, none are necessarily Islamophobic although if the findings were to be drilled down, it would almost certainly uncover a strong anti-Muslim, anti-Islamic bias. And it is highly likely that that same bias would have a strong resonance with the political discourses of recent years.

In many ways, the role of the BNP in the twenty first century has been misleading in recognising and understanding what has been occurring as regards political discourses about Muslims and Islam. First, the success of the BNP on the back of an openly anti-Muslim, anti-Islamic agenda distracted attention away from those in the political mainstream that preferred a similar discursive line. Whether this was because those from within the mainstream believed these things or whether it was a response to losing votes to the far-right – particularly in the case of New Labour – remains unclear. But what is clear is that the discourse of the far-right in relation to Muslims and Islam has, at times, only been slightly different from the discourse emanating from more mainstream political figures and parties. Secondly, the failure of the BNP in 2010s General and local elections clearly has the potential to be exaggerated in ways that overlook, negate or even ignore the significance or impact of its now embedded anti-Muslim, anti-Islamic discourses. To suggest that British society has rejected the widespread

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12 National Centre for Social Research, British Social Attitudes Survey 2010.

views of the far-right and its views of Muslims and Islam is nonsensical and both politically and socially dangerous. The same messages remain out there. Anti-Muslimism is still normal, the threat of home-grown terror and of Muslims and Islam more generally remains increasingly real for many people, and the fear that Muslims are seen to pose to 'our' way of life, to who 'we' are remains tangible. Whether this is put forward by the BNP, the EDL, or more worryingly those from within the mainstream of the political spectrum, dismissing or suggesting that Britain has come through the worse would be misguided. As the politics of Belgium, Denmark, France, Italy, the Netherlands and Switzerland amongst others have all recently shown, the 'problem' of Muslims and Islam is not going away. In many instances, the discourse, attitudes and actions attributed to it are indeed hardening.

In reiterating where we started, the climate therefore remains one where the 'next big thing' continues to be fear, one where challenges and problems will continue to be transformed into issues of survival. That is, survival against Muslims and Islam whether they be ordinary Muslims or the Jihadis and preachers of hate preferred by some. Should the threat of 'home-grown' terror raise its ugly head once more, it is highly likely that a reinvigorated political discourse will become even more resonant and relevant. Its acceptance and justification as normal will also find even greater resonance across an even greater number of people and the potential societal consequences of this appear overwhelmingly bleak. As for the far-right, whilst they will continue to play upon the embedded sense of fear to create, speculate and exaggerate about the threat of Muslims and Islam, it will be its future direction that will be interesting, not least because of the relative nullification of the BNP compared to the rapid growth of the EDL. More importantly though will be the direction of the discourse of the mainstream of British politics especially now with the arrival of a new coalition party and its vow to mend 'broken Britain'. It will be interesting to see to what extent the new Government's discourses will genuinely seek to mend a broken Britain or whether it will resort to preferring the discourse of defending a threatened Britain.

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## СТРАХ И ПРЕЗИР: ПОЛИТИЧКИ ДИСКУРС ПРЕМА МУСЛИМАНИМА И ИСЛАМУ У УСЛОВИМА САВРЕМЕНЕ БРИТАНИЈЕ

### Резиме

Након напада на Светски трговински центар 2001. године („9/11“), *Лос Анђелес Тајм* је писао како ће следећа „крупна ствар“ највероватније бити страх. Овај рад настоји да размотри како је појам страха и претње утицао и обликовао политички дискурс Британије према муслиманима и исламу – нарочито према онима стасалим на њеном тлу – током протекле деценије. С обзиром на широк спектар британске политике, укључујући и „мејнстрим“ и њене маргине, почињемо разматрањем Британске националне партије (БНП) и начина на који се она развила и остварила изборни успех на бази отворене антимуслиманске и антиисламске кампање. Имајући у виду утицај исте на оснивање и развој Енглеске одбрамбене лиге, испитивање дискурса других политичких актера, укључујући и нову лабуристичку владу, истиче се брисање разлика између левог и десног крила британског политичког дискурса. Да закључимо, теорије Мартина Баркера о „новом расизму“ испитане су као средство за разумевање промена у британском политичком простору пре доношења закључака који истичу шта би могли бити докази заоштравања идеја и ставова о муслиманима и исламу у ширем смислу.

**Кључне речи:** Британска национална партија, Енглеска одбрамбена лига, ислам, исламофобија, муслимани.

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