

Blair joins the attack on Britain's Muslims

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Prime Minister Tony Blair has placed himself at the head of an ongoing and sinister campaign against Britain's Muslim minority.

This week he used his monthly press conference to solidarise himself with former Foreign Secretary Jack Straw's attack on the veil or niqab, telling reporters that it was "a mark of separation and that is why it makes other people from outside of the community feel uncomfortable."

He also backed the decision by Kirklees council to suspend the young teaching assistant Aishah Azmi for refusing to remove her veil in front of male staff.

Asked if it was possible for a woman wearing a veil to make a full contribution to British society, Blair called this a "very difficult question . . . no one wants to say that people don't have the right to do it. That is to take it too far. But I think we need to confront this issue about how we integrate people properly into our society."

Amzi's case and Straw's comments were part of a broader debate which was "happening in a very haphazard way," Blair claimed. This was going on in different forms in Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Denmark. It was, he said, about the degree of integration by Muslims, and about "how Islam comes to terms with and is comfortable with the modern world." The debate was already going on in "every village, town and city" in the UK, as people sought a balance between "preserving a distinctive identity and integration."

Blair's comments were first of all an affront to Ms. Amzi's democratic rights. She had taken the council to an employment tribunal, under conditions where the prime minister had now declared his support for her employer and Communities Minister Phil Woolas had called for her to be "sacked." Her lawyer said Blair's statement had "specifically and directly" interfered with the employment tribunal and was a breach of the ministerial code, requiring them to uphold the administration of justice. He was considering taking an injunction against Blair to stop him saying more about the case.

But much more is at stake here. What Blair speaks of as a "debate"—that is somehow spontaneously preoccupying the people of Europe—is rather the deliberate cultivation of anti-Muslim prejudice by Europe's ruling elites, with the support of the mass media and broad sections of the right-wing and nominally liberal chattering classes. Its aim is to transform Muslims into scapegoats to blame for and divert attention from

mounting social problems, and to legitimise the government's claim to be waging a battle for democracy in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as its repressive measures imposed as part of the self-proclaimed "war on terror."

There is no historical parallel in Britain for the extent of the official xenophobia, interference in cultural and social life, surveillance and repressive measures that are now directed against the 3 percent of the population that are Muslims. But parallels can be found—in the McCarthyite red scare of the 1950s in the United States and, more ominously, in the anti-Semitism cultivated by the Nazis in pre-war Germany.

In the past few weeks senior government figures have lined up to join in the chorus of attacks on the veil, which is worn by only a tiny fraction of Muslim women, as a major obstacle to good "community relations"—or in making more general warning of the danger of extremism in the Muslim community. They include not only Blair and Woolas (who is the government's minister for race relations), but Chancellor Gordon Brown, Constitutional Affairs Minister Harriet Harman and Home Secretary John Reid, who called on Muslim parents to monitor their children and demanded that Muslim "bullies" be faced down. They have been supported by Trevor Phillips, Blair's appointee as head of the Commission for Racial Equality.

Not to be outdone, Conservative leader David Cameron used his party conference speech to pledge that he would prevent the formation of "Muslim ghettos." Shadow Home Secretary David Davis went on record backing Straw and warning that Muslims risked falling into "voluntary apartheid."

It has become routine for Blair and other government figures to proclaim Islamic fundamentalism to be an existential threat to Western civilisation. But more recently this is being portrayed explicitly as a struggle between Christianity and Islam. The Pope led the field with his assertions that Christianity was the foundation of European civilisation and his recent speech inferring that whereas Christianity was promulgated by reason, Islam used violence.

The Church of England has now also declared that Britain should be seen as a Christian country, while the head of the British Army, General Sir Richard Dannatt, spoke of the Islamic threat to Britain's "Judeo-Christian" way of life. This message has been taken up by others such as Melanie Phillips in the *Daily Mail*, who wrote that "Christianity is being written

out of the national script... This is why the argument over the place of the veil and the cross in public life is so significant. This is not about prejudice or discrimination. It is about cultural survival.”

The result of this poisonous climate has been a spate of attacks by right-wing elements who feel strengthened by this official endorsement of their anti-Muslim prejudices. Muslim organisations have said there is a surge in physical and verbal racist attacks, particularly on women having their head coverings or veils removed by force. Mosques and Islamic centres in Falkirk and Preston have been firebombed and attacked by stone-throwing gangs.

Things could have been far worse, were the ruling elite actually responding to public fears rather than seeking to whip them up. In fact, the vast majority of British workers are opposed to this anti-Muslim witch-hunting and scaremongering. A recent poll found that whereas a small majority of respondents agreed with Straw that veils were a “visible statement of separation,” nearly 80 percent said that Muslim women have a right to wear them. Amongst young people, only 31 percent agreed with Straw’s statement. And fully 74 percent of all those polled opposed any legal restrictions on the veil.

Nevertheless, the official sanction given to Islamophobia poses an ever worsening danger for Britain’s Muslims. It prompted Jonathan Freedland of the *Guardian* to pose the question of “what it must be like to be a Muslim in Britain. I guess there’s a sense of dread about switching on the radio or television, even about walking into a newsagents. What will they be saying about us today?” Both politicians and the media have “turned again and again on a single, small minority, first prodding them, then pounding them as if they represented the single biggest problem in national life.”

Freedland concludes, “I try to imagine how I would feel if this rainstorm of headlines substituted the word ‘Jew’ for ‘Muslim’: Jews creating apartheid, Jews whose strange customs and costume should be banned. I wouldn’t just feel frightened. I would be looking for my passport.”

Worse still from the standpoint of the democratic rights of all British citizens are the measures being taken directly by the government targeting Muslims. Following on from the threats and warnings to parents, Imams and Muslim groups that they must seek out and clamp down on extremists, the government has now set out to recruit all manner of institutions into a network of surveillance targeted on Muslims.

On October 16 the *Guardian* revealed a leaked document drawn up by the Department of Education proposing that lecturers and staff at universities and other centres of higher education be asked to spy on “Asian-looking” and Muslim students they suspect of involvement in Islamic extremism. They are to be told to inform on students to Special Branch. The document goes on to acknowledge that universities will be anxious about passing information for fear it amounts to

“collaborating with the ‘secret police’” and that there will be “concerns about police targeting certain sections of the student population (e.g., Muslims)”.

The document calls for the monitoring of the leaflets and speakers of Islamic societies and speaks of suspicious computer use by “Asian” students. Communities Secretary Ruth Kelly has also held a closed meeting with representatives of 20 councils in London. She told key local authorities to identify “hotspots” prone to Islamic extremism and asked local government officials to consider whether they were doing enough to tackle extremism in schools, colleges and universities.

Paul Mackney, general secretary of the University and College Union, warned that universities were “being sucked into a kind of Islamic McCarthyism which has major implications for academic freedom, civil liberties, and blurring of the boundaries between the illegal and the possibly undesirable.”

However, such McCarthyite practices will not be confined to Muslims and nor will any of the attacks on democratic freedoms now being implemented. Radical politics on student campuses is hardly confined to a handful of Islamic societies or to Muslim students. Once it becomes the norm to inform on those perceived to be a threat, it will be easy for this injunction to be extended more broadly in universities and elsewhere in public life.

It is imperative that working people and all those concerned with the preservation of democratic rights come forward to politically combat the attacks now being waged against Muslims in Britain and throughout Europe. It is a matter of principle that the persecution by the state and the media of religious and ethnic minorities does not go unopposed. And without such a counteroffensive, there can be no truly effective struggle against militarism and war and the ongoing encroachment on fundamental civil liberties.



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