

Britain: legislation on equality for gays blocked

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Britain's ongoing campaign to demonise Muslims has for the past few days centred on the suspension of Aishah Azmi from her post as a young teaching assistant at a Church of England school in Dewsbury, West Yorkshire. Kirklees Council, her employer, had asked Azmi to take off her veil in class because they said children had difficulty understanding her during English lessons.

The timing of the move, following as it did hot on the heels of former foreign secretary Jack Straw's attack on the veil, needs no comment. As might be expected, the decision met with immediate backing from the government as proof of Straw's argument that "in our society, we are able to relate particularly to strangers by being able to read their faces and if you can't read people's faces, that does provide some separation."

Phil Woolas, the communities minister, was filled with righteous indignation against Azmi—who had agreed to remove her veil in front of children but not in the presence of male colleagues—for allowing her religious beliefs to interfere with her responsibilities. He told the *Sunday Mirror*, "She should be sacked. She has put herself in a position where she can't do her job."

That same day, the *Observer* newspaper published a reported that there was a genuine case of someone in a position of authority who had "put herself in a position where she can't do her job" because of her religious views: Mr Woolas's boss, Communities Secretary Ruth Kelly.

Kelly most certainly fits this profile. She has delayed gay rights legislation intended to stop schools, companies and other agencies refusing services to people based on their sexual preference following protests from religious organisations.

Her departmental remit includes striving to end discriminatory practices, which gives her responsibility for ensuring the passage of the Sexual Orientation (Provision of Goods and Services) Regulations. The measures were supposed to be decided by a single vote in each of the Houses of Parliament by the end of October. But Kelly has delayed them so that the earliest they will reach Parliament

is April 2007. She did so in response to an organised write-in by Christian groups opposing the consultation document, "Getting Equal."

These objections centre on "fears" of the following:

Faith schools, which have led the protest, claim that the rules could affect teaching about sex or require them to let gay groups hold meetings on their premises after hours.

Christian marriage preparation and guidance agencies might have to cater for same sex couples and parishes would not be allowed to refuse the use of their halls for gay wedding receptions.

Catholic adoption agencies have stated that they might be forced to allow gay couples to adopt children and that they would close down rather than endorse the sin of homosexuality.

Christian retreat houses and conference centres might be prosecuted if they refused bookings from gay and lesbian groups.

There is, of course, the usual resort to scaremongering involved in such objections. Claims by the likes of the *London Evening Standard* that "All secondary schools in Britain would be compelled to promote homosexual sexual acts on an equal footing to the conjugal love of married heterosexuals" are both false and a favourite bogeyman of right-wing and religious groups.

In 1988 the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher incorporated Section 28 as an amendment to the Local Government Act based on lurid claims that left-wing Local Authorities were indoctrinating children into homosexuality. It stated that an LA "shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality" or "promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship." The clause was only removed by the present government after being repeatedly blocked by the House of Lords in November 2003.

In addition, the proposals in the Sexual Orientation legislation exempt "doctrinal issues" such as the Bible's

teachings on homosexuality.

When these false claims are removed from the picture, one is left with the fact that the Christian groups object to the proposed legislation because it means that *gays cannot be discriminated against*. And they want the right to be able to continue to do so. That is why they are seeking a “conscience clause” as a means of bypassing its provisions.

Instead of taking a stand against these religious opponents of democratic freedoms, as Labour boasts of doing when it comes to Britain’s Muslim community, Kelly hastily acceded to them.

“There are some difficult issues,” a spokeswoman for Kelly declared. “There are issues around Christian B&Bs (Bed and Breakfasts), where it tends to be Christians that stay there and some of the religious lobby are saying they would not be happy for a gay couple to stay there.”

Her department has since denied the government’s plans were being shelved and restated its commitment to “bringing forward proposals that provide effective protection from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. The delay is purely a result of the huge response to the consultation with over 3,000 responses received.”

However, if there was ever a case of lobbyists kicking against an open door then this is it. Kelly was appointed as Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government because she could be trusted to impose the government’s right-wing agenda, such as her recent warning to Muslim groups to clamp down on Islamic militants or face funding cuts. Her entire career in government has been characterised by public concern over her religious views.

She is a member of the evangelical Catholic group Opus Dei, which follows a strict Vatican line on contraception, embryo research, cloning and abortion. Founded in 1928, it was later established as a personal prelature by Pope John Paul II. Its members practice self-mortification, such as wearing a metal chain with inwardly pointing spikes around the upper thigh. Its stated mission is “to illuminate and order all temporal things ... permeating social, political, and economic realities with the demands of Christian doctrine and life.”

When she was made education secretary, with responsibility for a £1 billion research budget, her voting in opposition to stem-cell research was a cause for controversy. But even this pales in comparison with her views on homosexuality in her current position.

She has repeatedly absented herself from votes relating to equality for gays—on the age of consent, civil partnerships, allowing gay couples to adopt—and on the vote to repeal Section 28.

Kelly described her voting record as having been “according to conscience,” but claimed that she could still

“see through equality” and “see there is no discrimination” and would be responsible for “holding to the collective cabinet view on these matters.”

Kelly’s appointment and her record in Parliament illustrates the fact that the government’s militaristic and authoritarian agenda is incompatible with the defence of democratic rights, even on such a question as opposing discrimination against gays, where Labour has sought support based on its claim to be forward thinking. Indeed there is a logic to the promotion of Christian values by a government that has declared Islamic fundamentalism to be an existential threat to Western civilisation.

The battle against what Prime Minister Tony Blair dubbed as “a perversion of Islam” has usually been presented in terms of the secular values associated with the Enlightenment. But with recent contributions by the Pope reinforcing the Christian fundamentalist lobby in the United States, which also has the ear of Blair, it is increasingly taking on the trappings of a “new Crusade.”

Blair himself makes the usual genuflections to Britain as a multi-faith society, but he is most keen to promote Christianity. His support for “faith schools,” often portrayed in the right-wing media as a concession to Muslims, is rather a means of increasing the influence of fundamentalist Christians over education.

As of summer 2005, the vast majority of Britain’s 7,000 faith schools (6,955) were Christian. This year it was revealed that 42 of the first 100 of Blair’s flagship semi-privatised Academies had Christian sponsors, of which some were accused of teaching creationism in science lessons. Sponsors include the (Anglican) United Learning Trust (sponsoring seven), the (Baptist) Oasis Trust (four) and the creationist and auto dealer Sir Peter Vardy (three). The Church of England sponsors fifteen Academies and the Catholic Church four.

The *Observer* reported that Blair has backed Kelly’s stand and placed him as part of a “Catholic tendency” in the Labour Party. Although formally an Anglican, Blair’s wife Cherie is Catholic and he sent three of his children to Catholic schools. He has regularly attended mass and had a private audience with the Pope in 2003. The Pope’s secretary, Arch bishop Stanislaw Dziwisz, said a mass for Blair and his wife. There is widespread speculation that he will convert when he is no longer prime minister.



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