

Britain's liberal media lines up behind government's anti-Muslim offensive

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The political provocation mounted against Muslims by former Foreign Secretary Jack Straw has found its most vociferous backing from the nominally liberal *Guardian* and *Observer* newspapers.

Last week Straw wrote a column in his local newspaper describing the Muslim niqab (or veil) as a “visible statement of separation” and stating that he asked constituents to remove it when they came to see him. The veil, he added, made him feel uncomfortable and was a barrier to social dialogue and cohesion.

There was no possible innocent explanation for Straw's comments. A seasoned politician, he has acted as both home secretary and foreign secretary, in which role he presided over the ideological and diplomatic preparations for the Iraq war. Moreover, he made his remarks at a time when Prime Minister Tony Blair and other leading government spokesmen have repeatedly denounced Islamic fundamentalism as the major threat to western liberal values in order to justify their actions in the Middle East and encroachments on civil liberties at home.

Straw's statements on the veil were his contribution towards whipping up anti-Muslim prejudice and staking out his position in Labour's forthcoming leadership contest. Only weeks before Straw had written an article for the *New Statesman* on the right wing Labourite Anthony Crosland that made clear his attack on the veil was bound up with this broader political agenda. In it he wrote that, “The 11 September attacks and what has followed have also had the effect of exposing differences based on religion more acute than we have seen in two centuries or more. When Crosland was writing, the divisions he saw in society were ones of class; now they are principally ones of religion.”

Concealing such uncomfortable political facts, both the *Guardian* and the *Observer* rushed forward to defend Straw's “right” to criticise the veil and to portray him as a man concerned with the plight of Muslim women and with good community relations. He was, they insinuated, the victim of religious zealots out to suppress an entirely necessary discussion.

The *Guardian's* leader, October 7, described him as “a man of intelligence and discretion.” He was echoing “an unease that is shared by many voters,” and by no means “voicing prejudice” in “reasoned comments” that were seeking to “lessen separation and alienation.”

Straw's bona fides as a friend of Britain's Muslims were not only accepted. Anyone who pointed out his actual record of warmongering and attacks on democratic rights was denounced as an enemy of free speech and democratic discourse.

Defending Straw from those who would “argue that a minister who helped plan and execute the Iraq war is not best placed to challenge Muslims on how they behave,” the *Guardian* stated that such

arguments would only contribute to the “the repression of freethinking. . . If a fear of extremism, from all sides, is allowed to suppress open thought then liberalism and tolerance will be the ultimate victims.”

Both newspapers want a “dialogue” or a “debate” only if those opposing Straw's views keep their mouths shut.

The *Guardian's* weekly sister paper, the *Observer*, editorialised the next day that while of course Muslim women have the right to wear the veil, “their MP is entitled to voice his concern that wearing it restricts his constituents' full participation in British society” and did “not deserve the accusations of anti-Islamic provocation that were subsequently levelled against him”.

The claim that Straw was the victim of an attack on free speech is bogus. The aim of the *Guardian* and the *Observer's* defence of “open dialogue” and “debate” is to paint a picture of Islamic intolerance. But in reality, no one tried to censor Straw or his views, which were widely disseminated throughout the national media. Far from being persecuted, within days Straw had not only become the darling of the media, but been given the political backing of both Prime Minister Tony Blair and Chancellor Gordon Brown.

It was left to a handful of columnists to criticise Straw's views in newspapers that were overwhelmingly in support of him.

The reaction of Muslims had also been muted. Most hold no brief for the veil, but justifiably resent being lectured on the subject by the likes of Straw.

It was Straw who was in fact whipping up prejudice against others—and who did so from a position of high government office. And he was singling out a tiny number of women who wear the veil—perhaps 10,000 nationally—in order to imply that this was emblematic of a more widespread problem of “separateness” amongst Britain's Muslims.

Using his position of power as an MP, he was attempting to dictate what women seeking his help should and should not wear—betraying a calculated indifference to their religious and cultural beliefs.

For anyone genuinely concerned with democratic rights this would be the essential issue, not something to cite as a secondary consideration when placed against the defence of Straw's “freedom” to take his provocative actions. Indeed one need only imagine the reaction had Straw placed similar pressure on observant Jews or Sikhs to remove religious attire, or asked any other woman to dress in a manner that he found acceptable other than a Muslim.

Moreover, those genuinely concerned with women's rights, with combating the influence of Islamic extremism—or with good community relations for that matter—would also know that Straw's intervention on the veil can only whip up prejudice and foster the

sense of isolation and persecution that is utilised by Islamic fundamentalists.

Overcoming religious backwardness demands tolerance and respect for religious rights, not intolerance. And it absolutely precludes any hint of selective opposition to one religion and championing of another.

In contrast to such an approach, Labour is now in the process of “rethinking” its approach to what it calls “multiculturalism” and developing a campaign for a proscriptive development of a “British identity.” At the moment it argues that this is compatible with “moderate mainstream Islam,” but only if Muslims and Islamic groups prove their commitment to British values and actively combat extremists and their influence.

On October 11, Communities Secretary Ruth Kelly told a meeting of Muslims that it was time for a “fundamental rebalancing of our relations with Muslim organisations,” which would now be funded only if they fought extremism and defended “our shared values.” All UK citizens should speak English and have a sense of British history and traditions, she added.

That same day Gordon Brown told the BBC that he too would “prefer it and think it better for Britain if fewer people wore veils. That is what Jack Straw has said and I support.”

No one was “proposing new laws,” merely suggesting “the cultural changes that might have to take place in Britain... I would emphasise the importance of what we do to integrate people into our country, including the language and including history.”

Ruth Kelly is hardly a secular liberal. She is close to Opus Dei, the evangelical Catholic group that follows a strict line on the teachings of the Vatican. The Pope has made numerous speeches asserting that Europe is a Christian civilisation and opposed Turkish entry into the European Union on that basis.

The Church of England is also seeking to change government policy towards recognising Britain as a Christian country, rather than a multi-faith society. A confidential Church document, leaked to the *Sunday Telegraph* and written by an adviser to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, condemns what it describes as “privileged attention” given to the Islamic faith and Muslim communities—this from the official state religion in England. The archbishop, the church’s highest official, has met with Kelly to discuss to contribute towards the government’s attempts to secure “community cohesion.”

The *Guardian* deliberately ignores and attempts to suppress discussion of Straw’s record, his true motives, and the government’s wider agenda in order to paint him in the most favourable light.

But silence also denotes consent, a fact made clear by the *Observer*, which went so far as to link opposition to the wearing of the veil with the fight against terrorism.

The type of “alienation from the rest of society” epitomised by the veil “is a factor in the recruitment of terrorists,” it argued. “It is uncomfortable for any community to recognise that it has been infiltrated and its faith co-opted by fanatics determined to commit murder.” However, “Open dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims is an issue that goes beyond social cohesion. It is a question of national security.”

A more expansive and more explicit endorsement of Straw’s anti-Muslim agenda was produced by columnist Henry Porter in the same edition of the *Observer*.

Praising Straw for “lifting the veil on a taboo,” Porter wrote of a “virulent minority of Muslims [that] is turning its face against the values of liberal democracy all over western Europe.”

Straw’s only failing, according to Porter, was that “He didn’t quite say that the veil has no place in a liberal secular society, but if that was his intention I agree with it.”

Porter here argues in favour of bans on the veil in some European countries and suggests that he also supports the stance taken in France against the headscarf, which the Gaullist government pronounced to be an affront to the country’s secular traditions.

He denied that this was “to persecute Muslims for their beliefs or deny them rights,” adding, “Never having knowingly praised Jack Straw before, I think it’s worth saying that he showed a good deal of courage in bringing this issue to the fore and that he handled it intelligently. We have a problem with radicalised Muslims in Europe. Do we ignore what is going on and hope things just get better or confront the minority and risk antagonising a much larger section of Muslim opinion?”

According to this line of thinking, the threat from radical Islam is a fundamental one that not only justifies support for the Blair government, but an alliance with all manner of right-wing forces that are supposed to share a commitment to Western democratic values and Enlightenment thought.

Porter, like the vast majority of those who now claim that the West is faced with an existentialist threat from Islam, was a supporter of the Iraq war. But he also portrays himself as a critic of the government’s anti-democratic legislation at home. This is now presented as merely an impediment to a successful struggle against a far greater threat to fundamental freedoms coming from Europe’s Muslim minority—or rather a small minority within that minority.

He concludes his piece by stating, “We cannot very well defend our values to our Muslim neighbours, and promote the reason, toleration and justice that we believe to be innate to liberal democracy, if governments like ours at the same time reduce personal freedom, attack our ancient rights and the rule of law, encourage police officiousness, disdain the word of senior judges and busy themselves creating a society where total surveillance is the norm.”

But before remembering of whom he speaks, Porter has already described a nightmare scenario in which there is no choice but to break taboos a la Straw: “liberal democracies are already under attack from sections of their Muslim populations . . . radical elements have been empowered by al-Qaeda’s terrorist campaign and feel able to insist on the watering down of liberal democratic values in Europe with the hope that Sharia law will eventually be established.”

The possibility of Sharia law being imposed on Britain or anywhere else in Europe belongs in the realm of fantasy. Or, more correctly, it belongs in the propaganda of those seeking to make common cause with governments such as Britain’s that represent a far greater danger to democratic freedoms in Europe, and who are even now seeking to impose their will by force on millions in Iraq and internationally in the name of promoting “democracy.”



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