

Islamophobia in the British media

Barry Mason
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A recent Channel 4 Television “Dispatches” documentary, “Muslims under Siege,” showed how the demonisation of Muslims and the propagation of Islamophobia have become widespread in British media and politics.

Presented by journalist Peter Osborne, the programme was based on research for a pamphlet, also entitled, “Muslims under Siege”[1] written by Osborne and James Jones, a television journalist.

The “Dispatches” programme commissioned a survey of newspaper reportage by the Cardiff School of Journalism. It involved nearly 1,000 articles written since the year 2000, noting the content and context of articles pertaining to Muslims and Islam.

The findings showed that 69 percent of the articles presented Muslims as a source of problems not just in terms of terrorism but also on cultural issues, and that 26 percent of the articles portrayed Islam as dangerous, backward or irrational.

Professor Justin Lewis said the survey of the articles showed a “series of ideas repeated over time... that links Muslims with terrorism... with extremism... with incompatibility with British values. Those ideas are repeated over and over again and inevitably they are going to play a part in shaping public consciousness.”

A significant finding was that the emphasis of the articles switched this year from terrorism (27 percent) to religious and cultural issues (32 percent). Professor Lewis explained that the focus on Muslims having different cultural values is “in some ways more damaging, it portrays all British Muslims with this notion of being extreme and incompatible with British values.”

Many of the articles in tabloid newspapers were either outright lies or gross distortions. A *Sun* newspaper report of October 7, 2006 stated that a “Muslim hate mob” had attacked a house in an exclusive suburb of Windsor that was being refurbished

to be used by British soldiers returning from Afghanistan. Whilst the house had been vandalised, no evidence could be produced to show it had been carried out by Muslims. Osborne spoke to the senior policeman who had investigated the case. He explained the attack had taken place overnight and there was no evidence to show who had done it.

The pamphlet states the real reason for the attack was “simpler and rather closer to home.” An article written in the local paper the previous day revealed that the local army barracks received three anonymous calls objecting to the presence of the soldiers. The calls were from local residents objecting that the plans for the house would lower property prices. A petition had been also been signed by 40 residents objecting to the use of the house by the army.

Three months later the *Sun* had to issue a formal statement retracting the story, but has issued no apology.

A *Daily Express* article of October 24, 2005 claimed that pressure from Muslims had led to two major banks withdrawing the use of “piggy” banks in their advertising material. In fact one of the banks, the Halifax, had not used piggy banks for several years and the other bank, the NatWest, issued a press statement explaining, “There is absolutely no fact in the story. We simply had a UK-wide savings marketing campaign, which included pictures of piggy banks, running until the end of September. Piggy banks have been and will continue to be used as a promotional item by NatWest.”

The pamphlet makes clear the denigration of Muslims is not confined to the tabloid press, but is also present in the broadsheets, including the “liberal” ones. It notes that *Guardian* columnist Polly Toynbee, then writing in the *Independent* ten years ago, said “I am an Islamophobe and proud of it.” In another example from the *Independent*, Bruce Anderson wrote: “There are

widespread fears that Muslim immigrants, reinforced by political pressure and, ultimately, by terrorism, will succeed where Islamic armies failed and change irrevocably the character of European civilisation.”

Also quoted is the notorious outburst of author Martin Amis in the *Times*: “There is a definite urge—don’t you have it? The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order.”

The pamphlet notes: “Islamophobia is a tremendous force for unification in British public culture. It does not merely bring liberal progressives like Polly Toynbee together with curmudgeonly Tory commentators like Bruce Anderson. It also enlists militant atheists with Christian believers.”

In the introduction to the pamphlet, the authors say that the impulse to write it came from the comments of ex-Foreign Secretary Jack Straw against Muslim women wearing the veil. This was then taken up by other Labour politicians.

Labour MP Phil Woolas, then Minister for Race Relations, wrote to the press in support of Straw’s statements, claiming that wearing the veil invited hostility. Interviewed in the TV documentary by Osborne, Woolas claimed he was merely reflecting the views of his constituents.

The pamphlet comments, “It soon became clear that this was more than a random rumination from a member of the government... Labour appeared... to try to identify with a general mood of resentment and anxiety about the presence of Muslim communities in this country and to intervene in the politics of religious identity.”

As the programme pointed out, less than one percent of Muslim women wear the veil.

The campaign of Islamophobia, especially since the London bombings of July 7, 2005, has led to increased threats towards Muslims. An ICM poll of Muslims found that since July 2005, 61 percent report an increase in hostility and 36 percent said they or a family member had been subject to abuse.

Osborne spoke to several Muslims who had been subject to abuse and attacks. Sarfraz Sarwar has lived in Basildon, Essex for 40 years. He related how, over the last few years, his house has been subject to fire bombings and had bricks thrown at it. Sarwar has set up surveillance cameras around his house and feels he is living in a state of siege.

The programme and pamphlet brought out how the far-right British National Party (BNP) uses Islamophobia to try to increase its influence, noting that Nick Griffin, BNP leader, “has been inspired by the press.” In Griffin’s words, “We bang on about Islam. Why? Because to the ordinary public out there it’s the thing they can understand. It’s the thing the newspaper editors sell newspapers with.”

In their foreword to the pamphlet, Jones and Osborne point out that Muslims in Britain are:

- * Mainly young.
- * Tend to live in the most deprived cities.
- * Are disadvantaged and discriminated against in housing, education and employment by comparison with other faith groups.

The orchestrated campaign of Islamophobia can only serve to increase their isolation and lead to a growing frustration.

While noting that Islamophobia was promoted by the Labour cabinet following Straw’s lead in 2006, a limitation of the pamphlet is that it fails to link it to other aspects of government policy: namely the whipping up of fear of terrorist attacks and using the “war against terror” to justify the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as numerous attacks on democratic rights.

Notes:

[1] “Muslims under Siege” by Peter Osborne and James Jones, Democratic Audit, 2008



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