

Britain: Anti-Muslim campaign targets Birmingham schools

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Sir Michael Wilshaw, Head of Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills), has taken personal charge of schools inspectorate investigations into 18 schools in Birmingham, England's second largest city.

It comes after a hysterical campaign led by the right wing *Daily Telegraph* into an alleged "Islamic take over" of schools, which has seen Education Secretary Michael Gove appoint Peter Clarke, a former leading anti-terrorist officer, to oversee inquiries and snap inspections.

There are suggestions that at least six schools could be rated "inadequate" by Ofsted—the trigger for head teachers and governors being removed. All the schools have majority Muslim intakes.

Birmingham council has launched its own inquiry covering 25 schools and last week announced a freeze on the recruitment of local authority school governors in the city, saying that current arrangements are "not fit for purpose."

The huge resources being devoted to the various inquiries is vastly disproportionate to the allegations, and has all the hallmarks of a politically contrived witch-hunt.

Almost everyone involved admits that the circumstances of the claims are extraordinarily murky. The inquiries are in response to an anonymous letter leaked to the local press. The letter, supposedly written by one Muslim extremist to another, under the heading "Operation Trojan Horse", outlines a campaign by Islamic fundamentalists to "take control" of Birmingham schools. It focuses on Park View Educational Trust, which runs three of the four schools allegedly targeted.

The four-page document apparently sets out plans to stir up "hardline" parents against teachers with allegations that that they are "corrupting their children with sex education, teaching about homosexuals, making their children pray Christian prayers and [carrying out] mixed swimming and sport."

The letter says this campaign—which it describes as "jihad"—has already been successful, having caused "a great amount of organised disruption", with the "result [we] now have our own academies and are on the way to getting rid of more head teachers and taking over their schools."

Even the *Telegraph* acknowledges that the letter could be a fake, calling it a "purported document". Several claims made in it have already been proven wrong. The letter takes credit for the recent ousting of a head teacher who had left the school named some 20 years before, for example.

That has not stopped the publishing of further unsubstantiated and largely anonymous charges of Muslim "extremists" implementing gender segregation in classrooms, Christian children being left to "teach themselves" in religious education, and the hounding of non-Muslim staff.

Most of the allegations centre against Tahir Alam, chair of governors at Park View Academy and head of the Muslim Parents Association. The *Telegraph* describes Alam as being involved in a Muslim "network" targeting schools for infiltration.

Teacher Razwan Faraz has also been accused of involvement. He is the brother of Ahmed Faraz, who ran an Islamic bookshop closed by police. Ahmed Faraz was jailed in 2011 for "publishing and distributing extremist texts" to terrorists. However, in December 2012, the Court of Appeal quashed his conviction. It said that the prosecution had been wrong to rely on the fact that some of the texts sold by Ahmed had been found in the homes of others convicted of terrorism, since there was no suggestion these had encouraged their extremist acts. Razwan has consistently defended his brother and attacked his original conviction, correctly, as an assault on free speech.

Tahir has denounced the anonymous letter as a

“malicious fabrication and completely untrue”. David Hughes, governor at one of the schools, described the allegations as a “witch-hunt” in an open letter to Education Secretary Michael Gove.

Roger King, National Union of Teachers executive member for Birmingham, said members at some of the schools investigated had complained at Ofsted’s methods, including claims that teachers had been warned their school would be downgraded because they were “not teaching anti-terrorism.”

Christine Quinn, a head teacher at Ninestiles Academy in the city, described the snap Ofsted inspection at her school as “harrowing.”

She told the *Guardian*, “They were trying to establish whether we had the mechanisms in place to know if elements of radicalism or extremism were in our school, and whether we knew how to recognise it...”

In an unprecedented move, the head of West Midlands’ police, Chief Constable Chris Sims, publicly criticised Clarke’s appointment as “desperately unfortunate.” It would cause people to believe that this “has suddenly “become a counter terrorism investigation,” he said. “In many respects this is not a policing issue.”

Police were said to be examining the possibility that the letter is a hoax, related to claims of fraud brought by four former teaching assistants at one of the schools named. That has not stopped Gove asserting that Clarke’s appointment was necessary, as the allegations “need either to be substantiated and firm action taken, or to be shown to be baseless. We cannot allow uncertainty for parents or pupils to persist.”

At the weekend former Labour Foreign Secretary Jack Straw waded in, stating that schools with large numbers of Muslim pupils needed to “respect British values.” Segregating boys and girls was unacceptable if done “as a matter of policy,” Straw said.

If this criterion was strictly applied, it would lead to the closure of prestigious private schools in England such as Eton, Harrow or Cheltenham Ladies’ College.

Straw continued, “Alongside values which are religiously based, there has to be understanding that this is the UK and there is a set of values—some of which I would say are Christian based—which permeate our sense of citizenship.”

His comment makes clear what is really driving this campaign: not objection to the promulgation of religious doctrine in schools per se but the “wrong”, i.e., non-Christian, religion.

There is no separation of church and state in England,

where Anglicanism is the official state religion. Events in Birmingham unfolded as leading politicians competed to prove their commitment to Christianity, with Prime Minister David Cameron delivering several messages on the importance of his faith and Britain as a Christian country.

Gove now speaks of penalising institutions where “religious conservatism” gets in the way of teaching, but the reality is that successive governments have promoted religion in schools.

It was the Labour government in which Straw served that significantly expanded the role of religion in education—encouraging the growth of faith-based schools and the opening of Academy schools. Ending local authority control of schools is regarded as a vital step in the wholesale privatisation of state education.

This has been extended under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, with so-called “free schools” and a target for making all secondary schools Academies.

It is this policy that is the real “Trojan horse” in education. Corporate and religious interests vie to take charge of schools, damaging children’s education in the process.

This has enabled several to introduce the teaching of creationism. As a result, last month the government announced that all new academies will be obliged to teach evolution—a remarkable instruction in the 21st century.

But the value of such demands must be placed against Cameron’s boast that his government is “busting open the monopoly” of state education. Earlier this year, a document leaked to the *Independent* revealed government plans to sell academy schools to the private sector.



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