UK schools witchhunted by government to foster anti-Muslim sentiment

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The British government stepped up its anti-Muslim campaign this week by moving to put five schools in Birmingham, England's second largest city, into "special measures".

The decision was taken by the official schools inspectorate Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills). It came after a filthy campaign led by the right wing *Daily Telegraph* into an alleged "Islamic takeover" of a number of the city's state-run schools.

The witch-hunt began in November when an anonymous letter, now widely accepted to have been a hoax, was sent to the media. The letter, made to appear that it was sent from one Islamic fundamentalist to another, outlined a campaign to "take control" of Birmingham schools using a "Trojan horse" system. Education Secretary Michael Gove then appointed Peter Clarke, a former leading anti-terrorist officer, to oversee a number of inquiries and carry out snap inspections of 21 schools. In an article published in the *Times*, Gove said it was necessary to "drain the swamp".

Ofsted carried out monitoring visits at 16 schools, and full inspections at five schools. On Monday, Ofsted reports branded Park View School, Golden Hillock School and Nansen Primary, run by the Park View Educational Trust, Oldknow Academy and Saltley School, as "inadequate". They were put into special measures, meaning that their head teachers and governors can now be removed. Park View and Nansen Primary will have their government-funding agreements terminated, with Oldknow Academy and Golden Hillock School warned they could lose theirs.

Ofsted in fact found no evidence of any "Trojan horse" plot. Yet this did not stop Wilshaw stating, without foundation, that he had uncovered an "organised campaign to target certain schools" and a "culture of fear and intimidation".

The government's campaign is so full of holes it cannot withstand the barest examination. The inquiries and inspections were purportedly carried out on the basis of unsubstantiated and largely anonymous charges of Muslim "extremists" implementing everything from gender segregation, to compulsory prayers in classrooms. Yet in Ofsted's 2013 report, Oldknow School was marked as "outstanding" with no mention of the word extremism.

The Ofsted report of one of the schools, Park View, said the focus of their investigations was not extremism, as first claimed, but that schools had to have "an awareness of the risks associated with extremism". What these "risks" are is not outlined.

The release of the Ofsted reports was carefully choreographed in order to portray the events in Birmingham as akin to a national emergency. On Monday morning, Prime Minister David Cameron chaired a meeting of cabinet ministers at Downing Street to discuss "extremism" in schools. At 1:30pm Wilshaw published the Ofsted reports. This was followed an hour later with a statement from Gove in the House of Commons.

The content of this campaign was made clear in Gove's speech in which he said the Birmingham events had demonstrated that all 20,000 primary and secondary schools will have to "actively" promote "British values" in the future.

Home Secretary Teresa May rejoined, "For the first time, we are mapping out extremists and extremist groups in the United Kingdom. We make sure that the groups we work with and fund adhere to British values, and where they do not, we do not fund them and we do not work with them."

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Gove's statement was the clearest evidence that this manufactured crisis was nothing to do with tackling "extremism," but was designed to allow the government to further its reactionary agenda.

Gove said that in the light of the Birmingham events, all schools will have to accept a system of "no-notice inspections" by Ofsted. These were plans that Wilshaw has campaigned for since 2012 when he became Ofsted head. On this basis, the government will be able to proceed at an even faster rate to close what are deemed "failed" schools, and place them into private hands, as part of its overall assault on public education.

Figures released in April showed that almost 600 primary schools deemed to be "failing" have been removed from local council control, turned into Academies and placed in the hands of private enterprises. Fully 1,983 primaries in England have been awarded academy status, representing an increase of some 25 percent in just six months.

The opposition Labour Party made a few muted comments about the government's education policy while parroting its propaganda. Shadow Education Secretary Tristram Hunt told parliament, "It cannot be right that children have been at risk of marginalisation from mainstream society, cultural isolation or even radicalisation."

He claimed that "Ministers have been ignoring" an investigation carried out in 2010, after a Birmingham head teacher had "made a presentation to the Department for Education highlighting the risk of a radical agenda infiltrating Birmingham schools, but nothing was done."

Each of the schools downgraded issued a statement opposing Ofsted's actions. David Hughes, vice-chairman of the Park View Education Trust, said, "Park View, Golden Hillock and Nansen are categorically not failing schools… The Ofsted inspections were ordered in a climate of suspicion created by the hoax 'Trojan' letter and the anonymous, unproven allegations about our schools in the media.

"Ofsted inspectors came to our schools looking for extremism, for segregation, for proof that our children were having religion forced upon them as part of a Muslim plot. The Ofsted reports found absolutely no evidence of this as this is categorically not what is happening."

Stating, "Our schools do not tolerate or promote extremism of any kind", he said Ofsted's actions "have put Muslim children from these communities at substantial risk of not being accepted as equal, legitimate and valued members of British society."

In a comment published in the *Guardian*, Lee Donaghy, assistant principal at Park View School, gave an insight into an Ofsted visit to the school which "left pupils and staff feeling like suspects in a criminal investigation."

He explained how female pupils were "asked whether they were forced to wear the hijab (despite girls in the same class clearly not doing so)" and "one staff member being asked 'Are you homophobic?'." School staff were "subjected to inappropriate and bizarre lines of questioning, designed to elicit the evidence required to damn us. This culminated on the second day in an inspector making a quip about there being 'so many members of staff with beards'—a clearly Islamophobic comment."

Saltley school said, "We wish to stress . . . that Ofsted found not the slightest shred of evidence that there is or ever has been such [extremist] influence at this school. Parents and the wider community may be wholly confident that students here are safe and well looked after."

The Birmingham "Trojan horse" investigation has set a dangerous precedent in which the government has been able to use bogus claims of extremism to carry out its reactionary education cuts and foster anti-Muslim chauvinism and nationalism in the name of defending "British values".

Hours after the Birmingham schools were taken over, the *Guardian* reported that two schools in Bradford, another city with a large Muslim population, "have come under suspicion for practices similar to those seen in Birmingham during the Trojan horse investigation."

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