

**K.I.S.S (KEEPING
ISLAMOPHOBIA SIMPLE
AND STUPID)**

A BRAP BRIEFING PAPER

August 2008

INTRODUCING BRAP BRIEFINGS

Welcome to this new brap briefing on Islamophobia, the thirteenth in a continuing series of short, accessible briefing papers on key policy issues. Our papers are aimed at voluntary, community and public sector readers, local, regional and national institutions, and policy-makers across a wide range of equalities-related areas.

Equalities is one of the most volatile and politically sensitive areas of policy and practice. Practitioners need to be able to take the long view, but they also need to be able to respond swiftly to the pressure of contemporary events. In addition they must also play their part in shaping the equalities agenda – which increasingly means having the capacity to act at the local level while also scrutinising and influencing wider regional and national policy.

This is a period of transition for equalities in the UK. A concrete example of this has been the establishment of the Equality & Human Rights Commission (EHRC) following the Equality Act 2006. The EHRC is intended to provide a single, national focal point for all equalities work in relation to gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion and belief, age, race and human rights. Like many others, we will be watching to see how the EHRC actually performs especially given that a further Single Equality Act is proposed for Spring 2009.

But we also believe that equality is about more than just the latest theory or the newest policy idea, important as these can be. It is about creating real and lasting social change – social change in the big issues that affect the whole of society, of course, but social change too in the attitudes and actions that shape our relations with each other, as citizens, service-users, customers, residents and community members. And that is very much our purpose in producing these briefing papers – to examine key public policy ideas and assess their real potential to help bring about that social change.

BRAP's expertise and priorities are grounded in race equality, and we remain committed to combatting racial discrimination, but we also believe it is vital to develop more progressive and inclusive approaches to equalities that can benefit everyone, irrespective of their 'race'.

We hope that after reading this paper you too will want to join with us in that aim.

Please do contact me if you would like more information about brap and its work.

Joy Warmington
CEO,
brap
joyw@brap.org.uk
0121 237 3600

1 INTRODUCTION

It might come as something of a surprise to realise that around the turn of the millennium, both the term and concept of 'Islamophobia' had little relevance and was rarely used across much of Europe. Today however nothing could be further from the truth, where two oppositional positions typify our understanding of what Islamophobia either is or is not: from those who decry and denounce any criticism whatsoever of Muslims or Islam as being Islamophobic to those who actively promote the hatred of Islam and Muslims founded upon various ideological justifications. Because of this, neither clear thinking nor expression rarely – if indeed ever – comes into the equation as regards the use of or understanding of the term. From the 7/7 London tube train bombings and the backlash against Muslims that ensued through to complaints about irresponsible parking at mosques during Friday prayers, these varied and disparate events and incidents are – whether rightly or wrongly – regularly and repeatedly incorporated into the everyday language of Islamophobia. At times, Islamophobia is little more than an indiscriminate and all-encompassing term that is employed to satisfy or appease a vast spectrum of different voices.

In the UK, the situation has not necessarily been the same. Here, October 2007 marked the tenth anniversary of the publication of the groundbreaking and possibly most influential document of its kind, the influential Runnymede Trust report, *Islamophobia: a challenge for us all*. Produced by the Commission for British Muslims and Islamophobia, the report stated in its opening pages that, "Islamophobic discourse, sometimes blatant but frequently coded and subtle, is part of everyday life in modern Britain". It goes on, "in the last twenty years...the dislike [of Islam and Muslims] has become more explicit, more extreme and more dangerous". Who on the Commission at that time given subsequent events that have unfolded since the report's publication would – or indeed could – have predicted the situation today?

2 A CHALLENGE FOR US ALL

Back in 1997, the report spoke of how 'Islamophobia' – "the shorthand way of referring to the dread or hatred of Islam – and, therefore, to fear or dislike all or most Muslims" - was a new phenomenon that needed naming. Nowadays however, that same term is far from new where it is always seemingly lingering in the murky underbelly of our public and political spaces. Yet despite its wider usage, it remains questionable as to whether the debates concerning Islamophobia today and the way we use the term is any more informed than it was ten years ago. Increasingly the debates about Islamophobia see one side pitted against an other, where claim and counter-claim, charge and counter-charge dictate what we know and more crucially, how we know and subsequently voice 'what is' and 'what is not' Islamophobia.

Why then, despite the Runnymede report being so influential, are we still simplistic in the way that we speak about and understand Islamophobia? Why has a more nuanced usage of the term failed to evolve? And why, ultimately, has Islamophobia failed to be addressed let

alone begin to go away? With hindsight the answer, it seems, can be found in the Runnymede report itself.

3 CLOSED AND OPEN VIEWS

At the heart of the report was its typology for being able to identify Islamophobia. Using what it described as 'closed' and 'open' views of Islam and Muslims, the report added a further definition of what Islamophobia was: Islamophobia was the recurring characteristic of closed views. Conceived by the Commission, the closed views of Islamophobia were those that saw Islam as monolithic and static; Muslims and Islam as 'other' and separate from the West; Muslims as inferior, as enemy, as manipulative, as being discriminated against, as having their criticisms of the West rejected; and finally, where Islamophobia – namely all the preceding closed views - were becoming increasingly natural. All of which are useful in being able to identify Islamophobia in certain given situations – for example in the media – but how for example might the closed views offer any explanation or even relevance in other equally important situations, in explaining how Muslims are discriminated against in the workplace, in education or in service provision for instance?

In doing so, the Commission failed to offer a clear explanation as to how this might be possible, preferring instead to focus on how say Pakistanis or Bangladeshis were discriminated upon rather than Muslims per se. Incomprehensively overlooking what must surely be the central tenet of any Islamophobia – namely a distinctly 'Islamic' or 'Muslim' marker – the argument put forward for legislative protection was seriously undermined given that existing equalities legislation already afforded rightful protection against Pakistanis and Bangladeshis on the basis of their 'race' and ethnicity. With those who held the power to make the changes being left far from convinced about the reality of such a phenomenon, thus setting a precedent that negated the recognition and acceptance of Islamophobia as a very real and dangerous phenomenon. And also as something that was distinctly different from other forms of discrimination and prejudice.

Because of the emphasis upon closed views, so the report established a simple premise from which those who wanted to detract from or dismiss Islamophobia could easily do so by merely suggesting that if 'closed views' equaled Islamophobia, so one must presume that 'open views' equaled Islamophilia. Those who wanted to argue against Islamophobia therefore suggested that the only solution being put forward by the Commission was an abnormal liking or love of Islam and Muslims (philia). The black and white duality of the love or hate of Muslims and Islam was therefore the only options available thereby ignoring all those grey areas that exist in between. Since 1997 then, all that which has fallen within that grey has been given licence to gain momentum and form the basis upon which more indirect forms of Islamophobia have found favour. So for example, to what extent has a 'grey' Islamophobia been underlying the more recent debates about the need for better integration, the 'death' of multiculturalism, the niqab as barrier to social participation, the need for universities to 'spy' on the students and the need to look for the 'tell-tale' signs of radicalisation as well as the whole community cohesion agenda.

4 EXPLOITING A SIMPLE ISLAMOPHOBIA

It is these unaccounted for grey areas that have contributed to a climate where those such as the BNP have found favour and gained an increasingly listened to voice. One result of this was that following the 2006 local elections – where the BNP won 11 of the 13 seats they contested in Barking & Dagenham, making history through it being the first time that a far-right political party has ever been the official opposition in any council chamber in Britain – on the evening of the first Barking and Dagenham council meeting attended by the BNP, an Afghan man was repeatedly stabbed outside Barking tube station, his body left on the pavement draped in the union flag. How might the ‘closed’ views offer any explanation of this?

Since 2001, the BNP have become increasingly sophisticated and nuanced in the way in which it has spoken about and referred to Islam and Muslims. Unfortunately, the same has failed to occur as regards Islamophobia and so in the Commission’s last report published in 2004 there was little change in evidence, persisting instead with existing notions of Islamophobia, using the same language, ideas and meanings throughout. Continuing to refer to Islamophobia in such simplistic ways is therefore detrimental to understanding. More worryingly, the dualistic ‘either-or’ system of closed and open has reflected how Muslims have increasingly become understood in wider society. Whether ‘mainstream’ or ‘extremist’, ‘moderate’ or ‘radical’, as Ziauddin Sardar noted shortly after 9/11, Muslims have since been seen in one of two ways: either as apologists for Islam or terrorists in the name of Islam. Take this further and the closed and open, apologists and terrorists easily fall into that simplistic trap of being either ‘good’ or ‘bad’. As such, if you’re not a ‘good’ Muslim – moderate, mainstream and ‘open’ – then you can only be ‘bad’ – radical, extremist and ‘closed’. What is known and understood about Islamophobia therefore rests upon the naïve premise that ‘Islamophobia is bad only because it is’ and nothing more.

5 A ‘NORMAL’ WEEK IN THE BRITISH PRESS

As noted at the outset, the Runnymede report’s views of Islamophobia were at their most useful in the media. Despite the report’s apparent usefulness in terms of its ease of identification in the media and its associated recommendations to better the media’s representation of Muslims and Islam, the situation has since the publication of the report dangerously deteriorated. If research published by the GLA in 2007 is anything to go by, the amount of coverage in a ‘normal week’ relating to Muslims and Islam in the British press has increased by almost 270% in the past decade. Of this, just over 90% of this dramatic increase is entirely negative and typically rooted in stories relating to war, terrorism, threat, violence and crisis. If this is where the report was most useful, where then has the Runnymede report achieved its impact?

A decade on from the publication of the Runnymede report and a climate of ever worsening mistrust, misunderstanding and misrepresentation can be easily witnessed. Whilst the Runnymede report stated in 1997 that Islamophobia was becoming ‘more explicit, more extreme and more dangerous’, so in 2008 the same phenomenon has become more natural,

more normal and because of this, far more dangerous than ever before. The need for a new approach to tackling Islamophobia is therefore clearly required, as indeed is a new language and greater knowledge to both explain and respond to the subtleties and nuances of Islamophobia that are at present overlooked and subsequently allowed to take root and flourish.

6 WHERE NEXT FOR ISLAMOPHOBIA?

Given that the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia is once again in the process of reforming, so the need for a much more radical approach to Islamophobia is required, going beyond the 'simple and stupid' approach of its previous reports. If the Commission – and indeed Muslims and wider society alike – fail to do this, then it is highly likely that in another ten years we will be speaking at the end of another decade without having made any advances whatsoever, whether in understanding and defining Islamophobia or indeed, even beginning to tackle it. Now is the time to be much bolder and braver, addressing Islamophobia for what it is now and not what it was then. In doing so, we will become much clearer as to what Islamophobia is and more importantly, what Islamophobia is not.

Underpinning the discourse and rhetoric, exists a highly fluid, protean and largely inconsistent phenomenon that as yet has failed to be adequately captured. As Marcel Maussen critically highlights, “Islamophobia” groups together all kinds of different forms of discourse, speech and acts, by suggesting that they all emanate from an identical ideological core, which is an “irrational fear” (a phobia) of Islam’. With so many disparate events, activities, actions and attitudes either emerging from or being expressed as a consequence of Islamophobia, simplified discourses, definitions and terminologies that even include the term Islamophobia itself fail to properly and adequately provide enough explanation or understanding to a phenomenon – whether real or otherwise – that has had such a dramatic impact on both Muslim and non-Muslim communities here in the UK and beyond across the continent.

Given this recognition, how then do we move towards a better means of defining and conceptualising Islamophobia? How do we stop 'keeping Islamophobia simple and stupid'?

August 2008

brap is transforming the way we think and do equality. We support organisations, communities, and cities with meaningful approaches to learning, change, research, and engagement. We are a partner and friend to anyone who believes in the rights and potential of all human beings.

The logo for brap, consisting of the lowercase letters 'brap' in a bold, rounded, green sans-serif font.

The Arch, Unit F1, First Floor, 48-52 Floodgate Street, Birmingham, B5 5SL

Email: brap@brap.org.uk | Telephone: 0121 272 8450

www.brap.org.uk | Twitter: [@braphumanrights](https://twitter.com/braphumanrights) | Facebook: [brap.human.rights](https://www.facebook.com/brap.human.rights)

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