Who's afraid of the Respect party?
Dissent and cohesion in modern Britain

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For a demographic group that makes up approximately 3 per cent of the UK's population, the Muslim community manages to command more than its fair share of newspaper headlines. Rarely does a week pass without controversy, whether it be veil-wearing women in MP's surgeries, demands for sharia law, young men burning flags outside the Danish embassy or fundamentalist clerics preaching hatred of the West. Not to mention the would-be suicide bombers hiding within our communities.

The latter point is of course critical; the threat from terrorism provides the backdrop onto which the actions of the Muslim community are projected and then re-interpreted. British Muslims may have many legitimate reasons to mobilise, and as Statham reminds us, people do not mobilise without just cause (Statham, 2003). They experience some of the worst levels of educational attainment and unemployment, and suffer below average standards of health and housing. They are angry about the war in Iraq and Britain's foreign policy towards the Islamic world. And they are also trying to negotiate their place in modern British society. But the security issue is ever present and causes many of their actions to be misinterpreted – sometimes knowingly, often through ignorance.

Mobilisation within Muslim communities takes a variety of forms. Many have thrown themselves into community work to change conditions at the grass roots level. Some have entered mainstream politics, either through the three main parties and the Respect Party or fringe movements, like the Stop the War Coalition. Others work through representative bodies, such as Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) and the Federation of Muslim Organisations (FMO). And on an individual level, many are making deeply political interventions – consciously or not – through their dress, behaviour, and interactions with non-Muslims, which are raising questions about what it means to be British.

Ismail Patel divides Muslim activism into three categories. First there is the largest group who are engrossed in their daily lives and show only occasional verbal support for fellow Muslims, perhaps through participating in demonstrations. Second, there are those who strongly associate with the establishment and believe that the only way to change the system is from within. And finally, there are those who tend to be labelled as 'radicals' who push to the limits democratic principles to get their voice heard (Patel, 2007).

So, why are we so concerned about the Respect Party and all these other non-violent forms of mobilisation? Why does the emergence of a new political activism cause such alarm? After all, so many of the interventions fall into Patel's second group, people who are working through the system to bring about change from within. And they come at a time

when the government is stressing that it is strong communities – presumably as opposed to weak ones – that defeat terrorists and have the confidence to conduct important but difficult negotiations about difference. Why are we so scared of dissent?

There is no straightforward answer. The actions and intentions of Britain's two million Muslims are misinterpreted for a variety of reasons: a lack of understanding about Islam and cultural differences, the '*Daily Mail* factor' which makes politicians run scared of taking on conservative and reactionary forces, the left's historical fear of dissent after a generation out of power partly due to the factions within, and the lingering presence of many unanswered questions about the place of faith in public and private spheres.

What is clear is that this mobilisation is causing friction; buttons are being pushed and boundaries crossed, which plays on deeply-held uncertainty about life in Britain. It is easy to interpret the fallout as evidence of the failure of our integration policies. While those policies are far from perfect, the waves being made are in fact a sign that we are finally beginning to negotiate our differences and work out how to live alongside one another peacefully. Politicians must avoid the temptation of trying to tame them, and instead learn to ride them and live with the new uncertainties they bring.

The Britain of today is unrecognisable to that of 30 years ago: immigration, technological revolution, the end of deference, labour market reforms, globalisation and the wholesale emancipation of women in the public sphere have all played their role in changing the face of the UK. It is unrealistic to expect this to happen without problems along the way. As Saul Alinsky said, 'Change means movement. Movement means friction. Only in the frictionless vacuum of a nonexistent abstract world can movement or change occur without that abrasive friction of conflict' (Alinsky, 1971).

Things may get worse before they get better, but as we face the prospect of a new era in British politics, it is time to embrace dissent for what it is – our best hope for negotiating difference and change and building a mature and cohesive society that finally feels comfortable in its own skin.

Distinguishing violent from non-violent radicalisaton

Security is the elephant in the room in almost all discussions about British Muslims. The threat from Al Qaeda is real: our domestic intelligence agency is tracking 200 groupings or networks in the UK, totalling over 1600 identified individuals, plus there are many more they do not know about (BBC website, 2006); and the Metropolitan Police Service spends 75 per cent more time on counter-terrorist operations since the London bombings in 2005 (Cowen, 2005).

Any community that feels deprived, victimised or threatened will produce members who express their frustrations in a variety of ways. Some will look for positions of power to address injustices through official channels; some will stand back in apathy or through a sense of powerlessness; and others will take to the streets in vocal protest. Sometimes – but not always – a small minority will resort to violence, from riots and street fighting to terrorism and armed insurgency. On the estimations of our own intelligence agencies, the threat

comes from a tiny minority of Muslims in the UK. But it has come to frame the actions and words of the majority, whether they mobilise peacefully, or even not at all.

In the current climate, a lazy parlance has emerged in which the words 'violent extremist' and 'radical' have become interchangeable, as if either they were the same thing, or there were a slippery slope from anger to frustration to protest and finally violence. There is actually a paucity of research on this important interface, but evidence seems to suggest that the link is similar to that between hard and soft drugs: the link is less causal and more coincidental and is dependent on a much wider range of factors, social, cultural, and personal.

It is often difficult to draw a clear line between violent extremists and non-violent radicals. The former are always radicals, but radicals are rarely violent. There are a number of groups where the two have been shown to rub shoulders, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and Al Mujaharoon. The language of radicalism is often rhetorically close to violent extremism, but falls short of advocating violence. And for the uninitiated, even religious dress can trigger concerns.

The depth of this misunderstanding was brought home to me at a recent seminar when a Muslim speaker openly admitted to being a radical and fundamental, but one who does not condone terrorism or advocate violence in any way. As one might imagine, there was shock and considerable unease about someone so openly admitting to being a fundamentalist Muslim. What is perhaps more surprising, though, is the fact that the audience was made up, not of Daily Mail reading reactionaries, but security experts and practitioners. Misunderstanding about the relationship between violent and non-violent radicals runs deep, even within our national security apparatus.

Recognising the distinction between radicalisation (community anger and frustration) and violent extremism is critical, not least because it helps us to shift the calculus for mobilisation. We must remember that all action – moderate, angry, very angry and even violent – is the product of reasoning. As Statham says, '…high levels of mobilisation … [occur] …where collective actors have group-specific grievances, and possess sufficient resources to mobilise collective demands about these concerns on the state and the political system' (Statham 2003).

The best way to address both the angered and alienated groups and the violent tiny minority of young Muslims is to create a different set of opportunity costs. We need a framework where terrorism pays less and engagement pays more, and where safe spaces for dissent allow individuals and groups to work through their differences and build respect for one another in the process. As Salma Yaqoob puts it, '…it is only by encouraging the widening of this progressive expression of Muslim radicalism that the political purchase of strategies based on either terrorism or Muslim sectarianism can be minimised.' (Yaqoob, 2007)

When we fail to distinguish between violent and non-violent radicalisation we run a number of risks. First, we are likely to alienate precisely the communities we need to work with to defeat terrorism. Second, those communities are denied their legitimate right of protest and activism. Third, we risk pushing people and activities underground and towards harm. And finally, as a country we lose the political dynamism and energy of a new generation of Muslims at a time when our democracy needs this kind of engagement more than

ever before. Great leaders are born at times of political change, and one can't help but wonder whether the current crop of Muslim activism will bring us some of our political leaders of the future.

The 'threat' within

The fear and misunderstanding of our Muslim communities is not just explained by the current security panic; Europe has long had a suspicion of Islam. As one academic put it, 'the idea of Islam as a "problem" continues to exist in Europe not only as a legacy of past history, stereotypes and narrow minded attitudes but also as a consequence of the increasing visibility of political Islam and its increased physical proximity to Europe' (Silvestri, 2007).

Melanie Phillips and Michael Gove are long-standing critics of what they describe as the West's appeasement of Islamism and Islamist groups. For many years they were lone voices, but their arguments have now moved – largely unchallenged – into the mainstream. In his 2006 report for Policy Exchange, journalist and political editor of the *New Statesman*, Martin Bright, claimed that these types of organisations were engaged in a 'sophisticated strategy of implanting Islamist ideology among young Muslims in Western Europe' (Bright, 2006). The groups to which he and others refer include FOSIS (the Islamic equivalent of the NUS), the Young Muslims Organisation, the MCB and Leicester's Islamic Foundation, a higher education institute which has actually led many of the debates about the need for Muslim integration and accommodation of the British way of life.

Bright is right to conclude that Islamism is growing in polarity amongst young Muslims, not least because these groups appeal to the aspirations of young people. In fact, in many instances they are the only organisations competing for their attention. One former Islamist, Ed Hussain, who has recently published a book on his time in Hizb ut-Tahrir, helps to explain their attraction,

> We thought we were making a new world. Our job was to mobilise the Muslim masses here. There was that feeling of being on the cusp of a new world order which would revive the glory days of Islam. For a 17 year old who felt out of place in the UK, it was very attractive. Everywhere we went, we were the brothers to be respected. It was intoxicating' (Bunting, 2007).

However, what is rarely said is that Islamism is not inherently violent. There were even disagreements between the two main founders of the Muslim Brotherhood about the use of violence in their struggle. As one academic observes, 'It is widely known that the expressions 'political Islam', 'Islamic fundamentalism' and similar terms are linguistic conventions used to encompass rather diverse phenomena that have a connection to Islam and to political activism. Such phenomena can diverge, even conflict with each other, over the use of political violence. Hence it is inherently wrong to think that Islamist politics equals extremism or terrorism.' (Silvestri, 2007)

It is hard to avoid comparisons between the panic about Islamism and radical mobilisation more broadly and the McCarthy era's fear of Communism. Both are concerned with an external force becoming a threat from within and changing our way of life. The scale of both is exaggerated. Bright, for example, writes about the threat of Islamism, while at the same time berating the government for privileging Islamist groups in its engagement processes because they are marginal and unrepresentative. Finally, both occur in a period of rapid social, political, economic, technological and cultural change when a marginal concern is used as a totem for much more deep-seated challenges.

The Daily Mail factor: political risk aversion

This view has gone largely unchallenged. A succession of mosques, institutions, groups and individuals have had the finger pointed at them in television programmes, newspaper articles and think tank reports, but are rarely offered a 'right to reply'. This has implications beyond the reputational damage of those concerned: it is beginning to influence government policy. In private, government officials admit that they are reluctant to partner with organisations that have been through the 'naming and shaming' process, the evidence for which rarely amounts to more than a remote, distant or historical link to an Islamist group overseas. They are not prepared to challenge this view for fear of 'the *Daily Mail* factor'.

At a time, when the government – by its own admission – should be building its relationships across all parts of the Muslim community and helping to strengthen community infrastructure, political risk aversion is undermining its objectives. At a recent Demos seminar to discuss related research, there was strong criticism of the government's perceived strategy of 'selective engagement'. Attendees noted that the government appears to be refusing to engage with certain Muslim organisations – notably the MCB – either because of its refusal to take part in Holocaust Memorial Day or as a result of media portrayals of it as extremist, whether accurate or not.

This is causing considerable unease across the community. Firstly, because there should be recognition that these organisations are democratically elected so have legitimacy on those grounds. Secondly, because selective engagement undermines the limited leadership that does exists. Thirdly, because it is creating harmful divisions within the community – one participant even used the phrase 'divide and rule' in a throw back to colonialism to suggest this might be a conscious tactic on the part of government.

Political risk aversion has afflicted the Muslim community, too. Salma Yaqoob describes the challenges for those, like her, who have dared to speak out and challenge the status quo: '…those of us who advocated [speaking out and protesting] were often accused of increasing the problems for the community as a whole by encouraging the likelihood of a greater backlash. (Murray and Lindsey, 2005) These individuals and organisations find themselves in an incredibly difficult position. As Roberto Toscano put it,

> A difficult task confronts those Muslims who occupy the uncomfortable and increasingly marginalised middle ground – those who reject unconditionally any correspondence

> between Osama bin Laden's Jihadism and Islam; yet also have serious criticisms to make of western policies, policies which have contributed to the climate in which Jihadism thrives. (quoted in Abbas 2007)

Poor political judgement on the part of some Muslim organisations has reinforced perceptions of separatism and difference. The MCB's continued refusal to attend Holocaust Memorial Day must go down in history as one of the Muslim community's most spectacular own goals. In theory, they are right to say that we should have a day to remember all acts of genocide, not just the plight of the Jews in World War II. But their timing and communications strategy has played into the hands of reactionaries. Many Muslims confide privately that they despair of their approach, but a very different kind of political risk aversion prevents them from doing so publicly.

A basic lack of contact means that the actions of Muslims are often misinterpreted. There is no better example of this than the wearing of the head scarf and veil. For a country like the UK, where Enlightenment thinking runs deep, the growth in the wearing of both is seen as regression. I was reminded of the ways in which these views have taken hold despite a lack of understanding during a heated debate with a French academic about the veil. She talked of submission and gender inequality, but it quickly became clear that she had never even met a Muslim woman wearing the veil, much less asked her how she felt about it. This experience is typical.

On a research trip to Leicester last year I heard a very different story. The fifteen year old school girls I spoke to were tired of being marginalised within their own communities and having religion used as a reason for their exclusion from decision making forums, when they knew it was more to do with cultural norms and gender power dynamics. They realised that they would defeat these arguments most effectively *through* their faith; only by knowing their faith better than their elders and being resistant to the claim of being a bad Muslim could they assume their rightful role in shaping the future of their communities. What appears on first glance to be a sign of submission, was actually a fight for emancipation. This kind of story rarely gets told.

Political mobilisation among Muslims

For many years, the left had been able to count on the vote of British Muslims, but in 2005 many abandoned Labour because of Iraq. Some channelled their political energies into other parties, such as the Respect Party, which won its first and only place in the House of Commons that year, and which has a number of local councillors, including Salma Yaqoob. This political activism is being led by the young, but older generations are becoming more involved. As Mobeen Azhar said of the Stop the War activity in Leeds, 'I have grown up in a climate of disagreement and apathy in the mosque. My peers (and organisations like MPAC) will bear testament to the frustration of many in my generation with the depoliticised mentalities so unavoidably associated with many of our religious leaders. To get my parents' generation engaging, talking and organising was a very personal breakthrough for me' (Murray and Lindsey, 2005).

There are those who would interpret this activism – indeed any mobilisation along religious or ethnic lines – as a sign of separatism, but this misses the point that it is providing an important space for young Muslims to try out British citizenship for size. Analysis of the 2003 Home Office Citizenship Survey suggests that political activity by Muslims positively contributes to their sense of identification with Britain. (Choudrey, 2007), and in a recent survey, 81 per cent of Muslims said it was important to proactively engage in British politics, which shows that a majority want to opt in, not out, of the British political system. (Gohir, 2006) And in another survey, two-thirds of Muslim students said they did not see a conflict between loyalty to the Ummah and to the UK (FOSIS, 2005)

This view also ignores the fact that Muslim radicalism in Britain has been marked by its allegiances with non-Muslim organisations and causes. As Salma Yaqoob says,

> Yet the dominant character of Muslim radicalisation in Britain today points not towards terrorism or religious extremism, but in the opposite direction: towards political engagement in new, radical and progressive coalitions that seek to unite Muslim with non-Muslim in parliamentary and extra-parliamentary strategies to affect change. (Yaqoob, 2007)

This political challenge has been difficult for the left for a number of reasons. First, it has lost loyal Muslim voters at a time when it needs to hang onto its core vote. Second, the focus of this opposition around Iraq and foreign policy has made it difficult for the government to answer and the resulting vacuum amplified the voices of dissent. Third, the Respect Party has posed particular challenges by engaging in what some have described as 'dirty tricks' in its campaigning (notably around the unseating of Labour MP Oona King in Bethnal Green). It has also been more skilful than Labour at navigating and working community dynamics to its own political ends.

The rise of Respect and the growth of dissent among communities once loyal to Labour must open up old wounds; it spent a generation out of power thanks in large part to the factions within. The New Labour project, with its focus on party discipline and appealing to the middle ground, was of course, designed to reverse those inbuilt weaknesses. As Gordon Brown assumes residence at Number 10, he must decide which historical lesson he wants to learn in terms of dissent. Should he reflect on his experiences in the 1980s when it was the absence of a singular vision that kept the left out of power? Or should he learn from the 1960s, when he and his fellow Cabinet members dared to imagine a different future and pursued their vision through radical politics?

Dissent: our best hope for cohesion?

The experiences outlined in this article are not entirely unique to British Muslims, but concerns about security have brought them to a head in a way that isn't as true for other minority communities. While there are those who, for a variety of reasons, interpret this mobilisation as a sign of separation or the failure of our integration policies, this article has

tried to present an alternative view. While there are a small number of Muslims who favour separatism, this is not the predominant view, and the activism we are witnessing is a sign that Muslims are beginning to feel confident enough about their status in Britain to be able to negotiate their place within society. In short, what I am arguing is that activism and dissent can be a pathway into engagement in other forms of civic and political participation and that it is only by surfacing and working through difference that we will achieve meaningful and lasting cohesion.

Debates about identity have tended to lurch from unconditional celebration of difference (usually superficial difference) by the left to dogmatism around life choices and behaviour on the Right. In recent years, debates about Britishness have centred on finding points of commonality, areas where we can agree to agree. These discussions have felt disingenuous for two reasons. First, because they reduce identity to the lowest common denominator, which results in a vision so content light that it is not in the slightest bit emotionally engaging. Second, they skirt around the fact that there are areas of difference and disagreement that need to be addressed, not least around the conflict between personal and community rights, an old bug bear of the left.

The left has found this terrain difficult to navigate. As Nick Johnson of the Commission for Racial Equality wrote in a previous edition of *Renewal*, 'What differences are acceptable and what are not? Which differences should public policy seek to eradicate and which should it positively encourage? The left has not been clear on this' (Johnson, 2006). A cohesive British society with the kind of progressive approach to difference that the left would like to see will not be achieved by brushing the difficult stuff under the carpet. The left must learn that if it wants to embrace diversity, it must also embrace dissent. The types of non-violent mobilisation outlined in this article could provide some of the channels for these vital negotiations to take place.

The art of cohesion in an increasingly diverse society will be more about agreeing to disagree than agreeing to agree. For a Scottish Prime Minister in a fragmented United Kingdom, the temptation will always be to reach for that which unites rather than divides. But top-down, stage-managed national identities are not only unworkable, they are likely to increase the sense of personal and collective uncertainty as people are rightly suspicious of what they seek to hide. It will take political bravery to embrace the voices of dissent and challenge those who have managed to dominate mainstream thinking thus far.

Will Brown's bitter memories of life on the opposition benches in the 1980s loom large in his thinking? Or will his commitment to social justice and his belief in the power of politics to bring about radical change override any urges to play it safe? Only time will tell.

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