

The seminal 1997 Runnymede Trust report on Islamophobia defined the term as an 'unfounded hostility towards Islam, and therefore fear or dislike of all or most Muslims.'. This follow up report discusses events and trends since 1997 and outlines some essential steps its authors believe that are still necessary to be undertaken.

The intervening seven years between the two reports have certainly seen some notable advances as the new CBMI report acknowledges. These include:

- the inclusion for the first time of a voluntary question on religious affiliation in the 2001 Census thus bringing the British Muslim community statistically into view more clearly. They had previously been hidden by the more general ethnic categories of 'Asian', 'Afro-Caribbean' etc.
- the publication by the Crown Prosecution Service in July 2003 of new policies to ensure that religiously aggravated offences now attract higher sentences.
- the outlawing since Dec 2003 of discrimination in employment on the grounds of religion. This legislation has come into being as a result of an EU directive.
- the establishment in summer 2003 of a new 'Faith Communities Unit' within in the Home Office. Previously, work on religious issues had been handled by the Race Equality Unit.
- the setting up by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of services to support British Muslim pilgrims performing the Hajj. This support includes running a consular office in Makkah during the Hajj season.

The report gives much of the credit for combating Islamophobia in Britain over the last few years to 'Muslim organisations, working nationally, regionally and locally' (p1). Yet despite the undoubtedly greater coordinated efforts of British Muslims, the manifestation of anti-Muslim prejudice continues to grow apace and with increasing intensity.

The Stop and Search figures released by the Government on July 1st 2004 revealed a staggering 302% increase in the number of Asians stopped by the police in 2002/2003 under the new anti-terror laws. Even with the regrettable absence of the breakdown of these figures in terms of religious affiliation, it appears safe to assume that the single biggest increase in those stopped will have been amongst young Muslim men. It is also worth noting that although the police admitted that they only had an overall arrest rate of 13%, just 1% of those stopped and searched under section 44 of the Terrorism Act 2000 were actually arrested. Unfortunately, the police did not disclose the percentage that actually went on to be convicted of any terror-related crimes. As Sarah Teather MP (Brent East) stated during a debate on the Islamophobia report in the House of Commons on June 22nd 2004, 'these figures suggest that section 44 is being used indiscriminately' by the police.

Although the New Labour government was commendably swift in criticising the latest Stop and Search figures as 'unacceptable' and announced the setting up of an

Action Task Group to try and ensure that the police were not abusing their powers, they have not always been so responsive. Following the race riots in Bradford in 2001, the Institute of Race Relations found a huge discrepancy between the sentences handed out to the rioters from the Bradford district of Manningham - who happened to be Muslims - and those handed out to non-Muslim rioters from a neighbouring estate. It was concerned that the sentences were designed not to reflect 'the severity of each individual's actions' but 'to discipline an entire community' (p38). When senior British Muslims and race campaigners pointed out the disparity in the sentencing they were famously described by the Home Secretary David Blunkett as 'maniacs' and told to 'stop whining'.

The current report from the CBMI brings together various strands of research that pieced together paint a picture of a British Muslim community with some deep-rooted problems. Yet, it also helps shed light on some of the contributory factors which will need to be addressed if British Muslims are to be aided.

So, for example, the report documents that the number of British Muslims in prison increased from 731 in 1991 to 6095 as of 30 Sept 2003, an astonishing increase of 834%. Britain's 1.6 million Muslims, although making up less than 3% of the UK population, today comprise 9% of the UK prison population.

The CBMI report (p30) digs deeper than just this headline-grabbing statistic to reveal some more uncomfortable truths. It lists government statistics showing that 75% of Pakistani and Bangladeshi households are classified as living in poverty while 35% of Muslim children were in workless homes (the national average is 17.6%). 42% of Muslim children were in overcrowded accommodation (the national average is 12.3%). Poor health is also known to be closely associated with poor housing. Given these kinds of figures, Muslim underachievement in education becomes more explicable, together with the concomitant increase in unemployment rates and later criminality.

The Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia was established in the mid-1990s when during an earlier Commission on Anti-Semitism, a 'distinguished Muslim scholar argued cogently that there are many parallels between anti-Jewish prejudice and anti-Muslim prejudice in modern Britain and that anti-Muslim prejudice was increasing rapidly and dangerously in force and seriousness.' (pvii)

Since then the CBMI has played a key role in drawing attention to the pernicious nature of Islamophobia and urging public bodies, employers, unions and the media to engage in corrective measures. It has been an uphill task.

In an environment that is not particularly respectful of anyone's religious sanctities, several commentators have taken to arguing that Islamophobia is nothing to be much concerned about: in a secular democracy all religions and beliefs are equally under assault. Witness the relentless disparaging of Christianity and the established Church of England, they insist.

However, as the report's authors point out, the Church has far more resources to combat malicious or ignorant media coverage. Muslims have far less influence or access to public platforms, so attacks are for more undermining. 'Debates and disagreements about religion are legitimate in modern society and indeed are to be

welcomed. But they do not take place on a level playing-field.' (p8)

All those involved in the publication of this new report are to be applauded for their service in nudging the rest of us to move towards becoming a less discriminatory society.

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