From wisp of smoke to tragic wildfire

Robin Richardson, Ruskin College, 27 May 2014

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Prologue: The Conflagration

It began with a cocktail of self-pity, bitterness, anxiety, self-justification, malicious humour and hamhanded incompetence. The mixture was not particularly combustible, and not even a smoke detector, let alone the eyes and nose of an intelligent being, was aware of the fire's existence. It fizzled out almost as soon as it was started. Several weeks later the perpetrator returned to the scene and tried again. This time they blew on the first flickering flames and also poured on a bit of lighter fluid, and this time the fire had some purchase and traction.

Other people, by and large unknown to the perpetrator, had carelessly — indeed, recklessly — left combustible materials lying around in the building and quite quickly these began to burn too, sometimes as a result of direct contact and at other times apparently spontaneously, the result of radiant heat.

The fire brigade was called but some of its members didn't know what they were supposed to do and how they were supposed to cooperate with each other, and others surreptitiously fed the flames, partly out of boredom and partly out of a desire to justify the need for fire brigades. Spectators came not only to go ooh and ah, and lament and complain, but also to add to the flames some of their own stuff.

From tiny acorns great oak trees grow, and from tiny flickers there can grow great fires — conflagrations.

A conflagration, says the dictionary, is 'a destructive and extensive fire, a very intense and uncontrollable fire, a disastrous fire'.

This talk

In this brief talk I wish to recall the dominant narrative in Birmingham, the one that is most destructive, uncontrollable and disastrous. I shall note then some of the contextual and

exacerbating factors that contributed to the destruction and disaster, and that we need therefore to be mindful of. Third, I shall begin to sketch the principal counter-narrative that, hopefully, stretches before us.

The dominant narrative: 'Brumistan'

The dominant narrative began to be public when the security correspondent at the Sunday Times provided on 2 March 2014 some quotations from a document which he claimed had been written by a Muslim in Birmingham for sending to a Muslim in Bradford. It was obvious from the quotations to any reasonable person with time and inclination to think about them that the document was a forgery, a false flag operation. It was not, alas, obvious to journalists in the mainstream media, including to its shame the Guardian.

Famously, a lie gets half way round the world before the truth has got its boots on.

A lie is particularly likely to travel without let or hindrance, and without scrutiny and checking, if it confirms with biases and prejudices which already exist, as this one did, and if there is a pervasive atmosphere of anxiety, as there was in this instance (see below).

Eventually it did dawn on the mainstream media that the document was an incompetent forgery, for it was riddled with factual errors and howlers and was replete with anti-Muslim stereotypes, fantasies and phrases. The latter included the term Trojan Horse itself, widely used by Islamophobes but not at all by Muslims to refer to the dangers of democratic accountability. It could not have been penned by the person who pretended to be its author. Follow-up stories in the press, purporting to confirm the authenticity of the document and the reality of a plot, were obviously inventions or gross exaggerations, or else irrelevant.

But rather than admit they had permitted themselves to be duped the media said the document was 'possibly' a forgery and that in any case there were probably real plots and dirty tricks going on, perpetrated by Muslims. The evidence for such plots was clearly very dubious, however, so the dominant narrative changed yet again. There might or might not be a plot, the story now ran, but there was a real danger of radicalisation — young Muslim men in Birmingham moving on a conveyor-belt towards becoming violent terrorists without their teachers knowing or caring.

The dominant narrative's discourse claims to distinguish between good Muslims and bad Muslims, also known as moderates and extremists. But basically the only good Muslim in this narrative is one you cannot see. The current anti-Muslim narrative was developed from European and North American racism in the 1990s, which in its turn had evolved from anti-Russian and anti-Communist hysteria in the 1950s. It was articulated by so-called terrorism experts in the United States after 9/11, and on this side of the pond by Michael Gove in his book *Celsius 7/7* after the bombs in London. More recently it was articulated in a high-profile way by David Cameron in his Munich speech. According to the current discourse, the conveyor-belt towards violent terrorism starts with someone becoming more observant in their religious practice, more orthodox in their religious beliefs, more traditional in their dress, and more critical in their personal behaviour and manners towards western mores.

Arun Kundnani describes this discourse as 'the myth of radicalisation'. Myths are unwarranted by scientific data but are emotionally appealing since they provide consoling and flattering explanations for real problems. Also, myths help to defend or advance certain material interests. The myth of Islamic radicalisation, for example, consisting of fantasies about 'what goes on before the bomb goes off', serves the material interests of the US and UK military in their operations overseas, and in US and UK domestic counter-terrorism units and services. Kundnani writes:

> Islamophobia is sometimes seen as a virus of hatred recurring in Western culture since the Crusades. Others view it as a spontaneous reaction to terrorism that will pass away as the effects of 9/11 recede into history… My emphasis is on Islamophobia as a form of structural racism directed at Muslims and on the ways in which it is sustained through a symbiotic relationship with the official thinking and practices of the war on terror. Its significance does not lie primarily in the individual prejudices it generates but in its wider political consequences — its enabling of systemic violations of the rights of Muslims and its demonization of actions taken to remedy those violations. The war on terror — with its vast death tolls in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen and elsewhere — could not be sustained without the racialised dehumanisation of its Muslim victims.

Contextual and exacerbating factors

1. Uncertainty and anxiety

In common with all other local authorities, Birmingham City Council has lost many senior staff in recent years, and therefore much expertise, knowledge and wisdom amongst senior officers. In consequence it has been unable to deal with the Trojan Horse affair with appropriate insight, professionalism and sense of urgency, and unable to give support and advice when and where these have been most needed.

Partly or largely as a consequence of central government policy, there is much uncertainty and anxiety about accountability and legitimate authority in the Birmingham education system, as in most or all other local systems. Particularly the academisation programme creates or contributes to instability, competition and mutual distrust, and to an absence of middle-tier support and guidance. It is when human beings are uncertain and anxious, and when they do not have access to reliable and supportive advice, that they are prone to spread and give credence to notions that in more stable and sensible times they would dismiss out of hand.

2. The realities of journalism

'Journalists,' Roy Greenslade has pleaded, perhaps rather disingenuously, 'are human beings.' He continues: 'We work quickly. We are rarely able to obtain all the facts about any story. Some of our informants mislead us, even when protecting themselves with off-the-record briefings. Some people who could correct our interpretations of events refuse to talk to us. From hints, partial truths and concealed agendas, we try to grasp the whole and, naturally enough, there is a tendency to embellish, to stretch the facts which suit the scenario we imagine to be true.

Sometimes we simply misunderstand. It is in the nature of our business that we are bound to make mistakes. However hard we strive to eliminate them they occur.'

Diddums! — though perhaps we can be a bit sympathetic, since we too know what it's like to work quickly and to be rarely able to obtain and check all the facts about any story. Greenslade could and should have added that the scenarios into which journalists fit the facts are often set by newspaper owners and senior editorial staff, and that there is always an imperative to sell one's wares, which means not being upstaged or wrongfooted by the scoops and potential scoops of rivals. A favourite scenario, he could have added further, is one which excites a frisson of fear, of moral panic. Readers like scare stories, and newspaper owners print them not only to console and entertain their readers, and to reassure them that their favourite newspaper is sensible and well-informed, but also to put pressure on politicians.

3. Electoral politics

Anti-Muslim hostility advances the electoral prospects of certain political parties and individual politicians, and in consequence narratives about the Trojan Horse affair were affected by campaigning for local and European elections on 22 May 2014, and for the general election in UK in 2015. For example, there are politicians who stress as part of their party's appeal to voters that Britain is a Christian country and that Muslims should accept this ('Muslims must accept Britain's Christian values, says former Home Secretary' – *Daily Telegraph* headline, 24 April 2014), and they link this claim to the Trojan Horse affair.

(The claim that Britain is a Christian country implies subliminally, by the way, that it would not be appropriate for it to have a prime minister who is Jewish.)

Also, competing narratives about the Trojan Horse affair are affected by tensions and disagreements between different factions and interests *within* each political party, and in party-political disputes about the value of academies and free schools, and the respective responsibilities of central and local government.

And there are the ambitions of individual politicians. The secretary of state for education, for example, stands to gain a great deal or to lose a great deal, depending on how the Trojan Horse affair plays out.

4. Other politics

In addition to electoral politics the Trojan Horse is affected by relationships and power struggles between central and local government, and within local government between councillors and officers on the one hand and headteachers and teacher unions on the other.

Further, there are tensions and disagreements about the role, independence and future of Ofsted, and in relation to the expectations which different interest groups have of Ofsted. These tensions exist within the coalition government, and between the Department for Education and Ofsted, and within Ofsted itself. In common with the secretary of state for education, Ofsted

stands to gain a great deal or to lose a great deal, depending on how the Trojan Horse affair plays out.

5. Rivalries within and between communities

There are rivalries amongst Muslim organisations, both nationally and locally, for state patronage, recognition, grants and funding. These can be affected and reinforced by theological and denominational differences within Islam, for example between Barelwis and Deobandis, and can make it difficult for Muslims to speak out with one voice about matters such as the Trojan Horse affair, and the issues that it raises.

6. Personal careers

There are individuals in Birmingham whose personal career prospects are advanced or assisted by the Trojan Horse affair, and/or whose personal grievances are apparently vindicated by it. Also, of course, there are people whose careers are being severely damaged.

The counter narrative

Muslim parents and communities rightly want the education received by their children and young people to be improved. In recent years there have been major improvements nationally in the achievement of Pakistani heritage and Bangladeshi heritage pupils, and nationally there is no longer a gap between the achievement of these pupils and the average for all pupils. But these improvements and greater equality of outcome are not evenly distributed through the country, and there continues to be a need, in Birmingham as elsewhere outside London, for attainment gaps to be narrowed and closed.

Amongst other things this means there needs to be more recognition in schools for British Muslim identities, more attention to issues of bilingualism, more commitment to the human right to freedom of religion, more attention to Islamophobia as a form of structural racism, and closer relationships with parents and communities. Further, it means there is a need for more Muslims to be involved actively in school governance and leadership. The Trojan Horse affair must not be allowed to hinder improvements that are urgently needed in educational provision, and in the representation of Muslims on schools' governing bodies, and in educational policy-making and decision-taking.