Part I
Introduction: the Trojan Horse affair

The Trojan Horse affair first hit the headlines in March with leaks in the Telegraph and Sunday Times of what purported to be a letter outlining a strategy, called Operation Trojan Horse, for ousting head teachers in Muslim areas of Birmingham in order to establish schools run on Islamic principles.

Gove’s response

The press reports led in April to two rapid responses by Gove, based on a narrative of Muslim extremism and a potential link to terrorism. He announced that Wilshaw, the head of Ofsted, would order inspections of 21 schools, almost all in East Birmingham, all with high Muslim populations. Some schools were inspected twice within a few weeks, first a Section 8 inspection, which is not a full inspection but one focused on a specific issue, usually safeguarding, followed up by full Section 5 inspections.

The result was that six schools were put in ‘special measures’, the lowest inspection grade (one of which was a primary school already in ‘special measures’ from a previous separate inspection). Of the five schools at the centre of the affair three are academies run by the Park View Educational Trust, which comprises two secondary schools, Park View itself and Golden Hillock, and one primary school, Nansen. The other two schools are Saltley, a local authority secondary school, and Oldknow, a free-standing 7-11 academy. The PVET has also been inspected by the Education Funding Agency (EFA) and a report published.

The second response was to set up an inquiry led by Peter Clarke, the former National Co-ordinator for Counter Terrorism, a clearly provocative act. Gove’s 2006 book Celsius 7/7 indicates his long-standing belief in the threat posed by global Islamic fundamentalism. More immediate motivations would be to recover lost electoral ground by out-bidding UKIP on racism and to bolster his support on the Tory Right. It is a carefully engineered racist political offensive designed to associate Muslims with religious extremism and terrorism, for which Gove knew he could rely on a relentless tide of Islamophobia from the Tory press. The attacks on Muslims in the media may well be part of a wider Tory strategy to out-racism UKIP in the run-up to elections next year.

What has made this racist political offensive possible is another policy in the government’s neo-liberal toolkit: the unprecedented centralised dictatorial power of the secretary of state over the school system. The instrument he has used is Ofsted as an arm of government policy. It is widely agreed that they were sent in with an agenda: find evidence of religious extremism (See for example the 20 questions Tim Brighouse asks in the Guardian, 13 June).

Gove also took advantage of the Trojan Horse allegations to impose stringent new policies on schools at the national level: the highly ideologically instruction to schools to ‘promote British values’, and the introduction of no-notice inspections.

The Prevent strategy

In the inspections Ofsted used a key policy tool as a stick to beat the schools with - the Prevent strategy, a counter-terrorism policy first introduced by Labour in 2008 and beefed up by the Coalition in 2011. Its target is ‘what we regard as the key threat and risk to the security of the UK – terrorism associated with Al Qa’ida. We know that Al Qa’ida has sought to provide a theological justification for terrorism.’ (p64). ‘We regard Prevent work with children and with schools as an important part of the strategy.’ (p69). There have been various initiatives since 2008, including
Children’s Safeguarding Boards and work by ACPO (the Association of Chief Police Officers) with schools.

The Prevent policy document has a section on the curriculum. The requirements here are actually quite unexceptionable. ‘All schools are required by law to teach a broad and balanced curriculum’ and ‘to promote community cohesion’. And the document also says ‘where political or controversial issues are brought to pupils’ attention, they are offered a balanced presentation of opposing views.’ Ironically, since promoting ‘British values’ is both political and controversial it follows that schools must offer opposing views, which really would be education for critical understanding. The principal barrier is another policy of Gove, the enormous pressure of the exam-driven curriculum, squeezing out time for debate and citizenship education.

Ofsted didn’t find evidence of ‘extremism’. But this isn’t surprising – even the government’s Prevent document itself warns against assuming there is a significant problem:

‘We regard Prevent work with children and with schools as an important part of the strategy. But this work needs to be proportionate. It must not start from a misplaced assumption that there is a significant problem that needs to be resolved. We have seen some evidence of very limited radicalisation of children by extremist or terrorist groups. … these issues must be kept in perspective.’ (p69)

Furthermore, as Birmingham City Council says:

‘It is important to note that whilst this element of safeguarding is already addressed in the Ofsted framework for school inspections, it has only very recently in this context assumed the significance that Ofsted has now given to it. Up to this point, the Council was unaware of any other inspections that have reported specifically on a school’s need to take certain or greater precautions against radicalism and extremism.’ (BCC 9 June)

In other words, Gove sent in Ofsted to find the schools guilty. Ofsted couldn’t find evidence of ‘extremism’, but they used the Prevent strategy as the stick to beat the schools with for not doing more to inoculate children against it – including a nursery school! This of course is an open-ended criterion against which many schools would fall short if they were inspected in the same way – but of course they aren’t, only those that Gove chose to apply it to.

The effect on the Muslim community

Gove’s actions attempted to establish a link between religious conservatism within Islam and terrorism. That was the rationale for instructing Ofsted to inspect 21 schools and the decision to commission Peter Clarke to carry out an inquiry. Gove will have been well aware that the media, and in particular the Tory press, would provide a continuous commentary reinforcing the ‘conservative Islam = extremism = terrorism’ narrative and the consequent demonisation of the whole Muslim community. The Birmingham Mail obliged with its front page headline on 7 March: ‘Trojan Horse Jihadist plot to take over Birmingham schools’. In this discourse a key term is ‘extremism’, a conveniently vague and ambivalent word whose meaning was stretched to encompass conservative Islam and terrorism, thus linking them together.

The effect on the Muslim community in East Birmingham has been very damaging. During the media storm pupils and staff were subjected to harassment by the press as they went to school, including students who were preparing for their GCSE exams. More fundamentally the attempt to tar all Muslims with the brush of ‘extremism’ has a longer term effect, including creating fears among
The ‘Putting Birmingham School Kids First’ campaign

However, the Muslim community has not responded passively to these attacks: it has fought back. The campaign was launched at a huge public meeting on 24 June of at least 500 people, maybe several hundred more, with a very wide range of speakers. Below is the manifesto of the campaign. It rejects the allegations of radicalisation and extremism, and questions the impartiality of Ofsted. But it acknowledges that there are conservative as well as liberal views within the Muslim community (as with any religion) and that there are some governance issues in some schools which need investigating and fixing. The manifesto looks forward to a new partnership of stakeholders sharing and developing outstanding practice.

PUTTING BIRMINGHAM SCHOOL KIDS FIRST

The central allegation, that there was an organized plot to radicalise school children in a handful of Birmingham schools, remains unproven. What the OFSTED reports show is some governance issues in some schools.

In order to fix these problems we need greater clarity about the issues these investigations have revealed. This needs to be done without the sensationalist references to extremism and national security that we have seen so far which have caused confusion and concern across the city and country. Many people now believe that their children’s educational potential, achievement and well-being is being threatened by politicians, who wish to be seen as ‘tough’ on Muslims.

This approach has been deeply unhelpful, hurtful and insulting, and most importantly could prevent us finding the solutions we need to help school children in Birmingham.

The Putting Birmingham School Kids First campaign aims to:

1. Make sure that any issues of governance within Birmingham schools are fixed and fixed fast.

2. Challenge the false and divisive allegation that this is a problem of systematic radicalization, extremism or terrorism.

We will work with anyone who is willing to put the interests of our children first. But the starting point has to be a true understanding of the problem. Many people have serious concerns about the impartiality of OFSTED and feel there was a climate of fear surrounding their investigations. But even their 21 investigations did not reveal a link to radicalisation. We share the view of West Midlands Chief Constable that the appointment of a counter-terrorism expert to investigate our schools was a provocative and unhelpful move.

The Muslim community is no different to any other faith community in having a spectrum of opinions, from liberal to conservative, on what is the correct balance between secular and religious values in the provision of education. Instead of debating these issues openly, the government has taken the completely inappropriate approach of linking this with the prevention of terrorism.

Workable solutions will not appear overnight. Trust has broken down between those who should be working together. Our role in the journey is to provide parents, staff, pupils and governors a strong
We want solutions that ensure our school children receive a top quality education that prepares them to be engaged and active citizens. There are already many cases of outstanding practice in Birmingham, these need to be acknowledged and adopted more widely. We are proud that Birmingham is among the youngest and most multi-cultural cities in the world and stand by its people in all their diversity.

Signed: Tim Brighouse (Former Education Commissioner), Shabana Mahmood MP, Christine Blower (NUT General Secretary), Salma Yaqoob (Convenor), Dr Chris Allen (Birmingham University), Revd Ray Gaston, (Anglican Priest), Father Oliver Coss, and many others....

The Tories have made governors unaccountable

The PBSKF manifesto acknowledges that there are issues of governance. We have seen how the attack on Birmingham schools is the result of the combination of three Tory policies: racism against Muslims, Ofsted as an arm of government, and the abuse of the Prevent strategy. We must now add a fourth Tory policy to explain what has happened: local operational autonomy for schools – i.e. for governors and heads. This applies not just to academies, which are outside local authorities, but also to local authority schools as a result of the drastic reduction in or termination of the powers and resources of local authorities to monitor and intervene where necessary. The consequence is that some governing bodies have been able to interfere in the responsibilities of teachers and impose unacceptable practices, whether from a conservative religious standpoint or not, on the schools. As Tim Brighouse, ex-CEO of Birmingham, said:

‘So great have been the recent cuts in local authority expenditure that Birmingham and many other local authorities have neither the resources nor sufficient senior and experienced staff to carry out their role effectively. Worse, the arrival of academies and free schools has created an open season for lay people and professionals keen to pursue their own eccentric ideas about schooling: and when trust or governor vacancies occur, some perpetuate the very English tradition of inviting friends to join them. When the community is white it doesn't cause much comment. In mono-ethnic east Birmingham, however, it is seen as a Muslim plot to expose pupils to an undefined "extremism".’ (Guardian, 17 June)

The governance issues

The Ofsted and EFA reports include critical references to governance, management and curriculum and other educational practices which are contrary to those acceptable. We recognise that the decision to carry out these inspections was politically motivated by Gove. However, while taking account of the government’s motivation we do not base our response on it, we make our own critical assessment of the evidence presented in the reports.

The role of governors

We note the complaints by some staff members at all five schools that the governing body interferes inappropriately in the day-to-day running of the school. We also note the criticisms of the competence of governors, including financial irregularities. One issue of particular concern concerns the apparent lack of fairness of some recruitment and promotion practices by governors.

The role of school management

We also note the complaints by some staff members of unfair treatment by school management.
**Curriculum and equality issues**

There is evidence in the reports of serious problems in some schools of denial of children’s entitlement to a broad, balanced and socially just education. They include gender segregation between and within classes (which is only acceptable for sex education and some PE activities), a restricted curriculum depriving pupils of some subject areas (such as art and music) or issues within them (such as sexual orientation and relationships) or biased treatment of them (such as evolution). To ignore or downplay these issues, insofar as the evidence is accurate, or to fail to put forward an effective strategy to deal with them, would be to collude in the perpetuation of injustice. It would also weaken the campaign against the government’s attacks by making it vulnerable to the criticism of failing to acknowledge and act on serious failings.

We recognise that these issues may apply to many schools in the city in various ways. Addressing them effectively in the schools currently under attack can serve as a catalyst to tackle them in other schools.

**The Kershaw Report**

The Council commissioned Ian Kershaw, an ex-headteacher, to carry out an inquiry. His report was published in July. ([http://www.greaterbirmingham.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Full-Report-%E2%80%93-REDACTED.pdf](http://www.greaterbirmingham.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Full-Report-%E2%80%93-REDACTED.pdf)) In our view the general analysis in his report is credible and convincing, even if there are some contestable points. We agree with the response of Shabana Mahmood, MP for Ladywood:

"I welcome this detailed, methodical report which finally lays to rest the myth that there was an organised plot to radicalise children in a small number of schools in Birmingham. It also lays out what we already suspected; that in a handful of schools there were serious governance issues which must be addressed.

"Non faith schools in the state sector must remain exactly that and the way they are run must reflect that. It is clear from the Kershaw report that in a number of cases schools deviated from their secular ethos and that the processes in place by the Council and the DFE were not robust enough to either detect or prevent this occurring."

Here is an extract from Kershaw’s Executive Summary:

7. The evidence drawn out of the investigation suggests that some people take the view that there are schools in East Birmingham that are failing Muslim children and in response there are groups of British male governors and teachers, predominantly of Pakistani heritage, which have formed in order to take action to address the perceived failings. Some of the individuals involved have a great deal of influence in their communities and have used this to coalesce others to influence local schools. It is a determined effort to change schools, often by unacceptable practices, in order to influence educational and religious provision for the students served. It is also seen as a means to raise standards. There is no evidence of a conspiracy to promote an anti-British agenda, violent extremism or radicalisation in schools in East Birmingham.

8. It appears that there is a genuine and understandable desire amongst these groups to improve the education and opportunities for Muslim pupils. This desire is often coupled with a belief that the children can only be served by Muslim leaders and teachers. These ‘activists’ have regarded the role of being a governor as a means to an end. Where they judge a school to be failing the students, they
have seen their role as one of leading change through the replacement of school leadership and an improper manipulation of school governance. There is a need to guard against this behaviour, which does not comply with local authority and school governance legal obligations.

9. The evidence suggests that there is a pattern to this behaviour, with these activist governors translating their improvement agenda into:

9.1 placing demands upon head teachers to modify curriculum provision which denies students their right to access a broad and balanced curriculum, including the right to understand other world religions and the right to sex and relationship education;

9.2 placing inappropriate demands on head teachers by repeatedly requesting information;

9.3 being overly challenging and sometimes aggressive in the management of head teachers;

9.4 undermining head teachers during Ofsted inspections;

9.5 interference in operational matters; and

9.6 inappropriate appointments of friends and relatives.

10. This has resulted in conflict with head teachers, other members of staff and other governors, who are required to follow certain legal obligations in relation to education. In some schools and academies the introduction of Islamic assemblies without the authorisation of SACRE, or the Secretary of State in the case of academies, means that head teachers and governors are breaking the law.

BCASE believes that the evidence from the Kershaw and Clarke reports and the Ofsted and Education Funding Agency inspection reports, together with personal testimony by some of the teachers in the schools, largely bears out the validity of these conclusions. In Part 2 we quote some of the most convincing findings.

The Kershaw report Executive Summary also comments on the role of the LA:

11. Due to certain weaknesses in the systems and processes that surround school governance, as well as local authority failings, this has been allowed to happen unchecked. BCC was aware of some of these concerns, and failed to spot others when it should have done, due to a failure to join up the intelligence it did receive in relation to these schools. In some cases, BCC was actually a vehicle for promoting some of these problems, with head teachers being eased out through the profligate use of compromise agreements, rather than supported. BCC’s inability to address these problems has been exacerbated by a culture within BCC of not wanting to address difficult issues and problems with school governance where there is a risk that BCC may be accused of being racist or Islamophobic.

BCC has accepted the validity of Kershaw’s comments. When the council’s Kershaw report was published on 14 July, with its criticisms of the council’s role, Albert Bore, Leader of Birmingham City Council, made a statement acknowledging that the council had made mistakes:

“The report has highlighted areas where we have either taken no action, were too slow to take action, or have simply done the wrong thing. The report further states this has often been because of the risk of being seen as racist or Islamophobic. Our proper commitment to cohesion in
communities sometimes overrode the need to tackle difficult questions about what was happening in a small number of schools.”

There is a widespread recognition, ranging from the community-led Putting Birmingham School Kids First campaign to the joint Scrutiny Committee meeting on 30 July, that the various reports have disproved the allegation of radicalisation and violent extremism but they have identified some serious malpractices of governance in several schools.

Not surprisingly, those responsible for those unacceptable governance practices and their co-thinkers have denied them. There has also been a reluctance by some supporters of the campaign itself to acknowledge the seriousness of the problems, perhaps in the mistaken belief that to do so detracts from the condemnation of the government for its Islamophobic response. In reality the opposite is the case: to deny or minimise the problems would undermine the credibility of the campaign. Putting Birmingham school kids first means tackling the obstacles to their entitlement to a high quality and socially just education, both from government and within the schools themselves.

Below we quote two recent statements by voices within the Muslim community which challenge the deniers and minimisers to face up to the serious malpractices that the reports identified.

The first is by the Muslim Women’s Network UK, which is based in Birmingham.

TROJAN HORSE: STATEMENT BY MUSLIM WOMEN’S NETWORK UK
http://www.mwnuk.co.uk/TROJAN_HORSE_STATEMENT_BY_MUSLIM_WOMEN_S_NETWORK_UK_13_resourcedetail.php

TROJAN HORSE: Those who have failed children should be held accountable

Muslim Women’s Network UK (MWNUK) welcome the finding in both Peter Clarke’s and Ian Kershaw’s reports, that overall there is no evidence of promoting violent extremism in the schools investigated, although the report by Peter Clarke makes reference to some specific concerns of extremism. MWNUK has maintained that the ‘Trojan Horse’ debate should not have been about extremism but about very serious governance issues. It is important not to conflate religious conservatism with extremist agendas. Given the current hostility towards Muslims, the initial language used to frame the debate by some sections of the media and some government leaders and officials has been unhelpful. It has had the effect of increasing Muslim vulnerability to Islamophobia. However, it is also important that ‘no evidence of extremism’ is not used to continue to downplay the very serious findings of malpractice in the reports either.

We all have a duty to keep children safe and ensure they are treated equally regardless of their race, faith or gender. MWNUK therefore believes any concerns regarding children should always be acted upon. Despite local criticisms, it was right to investigate a number of schools in Birmingham after the ‘Trojan Horse’ letter emerged. Community sensitivities should never be prioritised over the safeguarding of children.

The findings in the OFSTED reports, the Birmingham City Council report by Ian Kershaw and Department of Education report by Peter Clarke must now be acted upon. Individuals and organisations that have failed Birmingham’s children should all be held accountable. No-one should be protected whether they are considered respected members of the local Muslim community or because they are people in high positions of authority in local or central government. Everyone has failed the children and no-one can claim the moral high ground. OFSTED failed because they rated the schools as outstanding during initial inspections as they only focused on results and ignored the
quality of the curriculum and safeguarding issues. The local authority and Department of Education failed to act on previous complaints and lacked adequate oversight. A small number of religiously conservative individuals exploited their positions as governors and staff to promote hardline ideologies and behaved like moral police in state secular schools.

Some local campaigners too have failed the school pupils. They seemed to play down serious concerns about school governance by portraying them as ‘normal HR issues.’ Very real fears of Islamophobia have also been exploited by invariably stating there had been a targeted ‘witch hunt.’ Their complacency in the face of opposing views being ignored and silenced resulted in witnesses feeling unable to speak out. While we congratulate the schools for their high educational achievements, these should never be used as an excuse to turn a blind eye to misogyny, intolerance towards other faiths and safeguarding failures.

This narrative, which gained predominance, needs to be challenged. It was for this reason that the Chair of MWNUK, Shaista Gohir, began to voice concerns publicly. However, this resulted in a social media hate and abuse campaign being waged against her. When she refused to be silenced the abuse was escalated and her children were threatened; this was reported to the police. The MWNUK board strongly condemns the bullying and harassment that she and others have been subjected to for speaking out on this issue.

We also commend the bravery of those who were courageous and came forward and gave vital evidence to the investigators, some of whom also contacted MWNUK, considered an impartial and trusted organisation. As a women’s rights organisation MWNUK are horrified at the numerous concerns raised directly with us especially with regards issues of equality and diversity. We were told about segregation in some classes and assemblies. Expected seating arrangements were made clear to pupils so they would self-segregate and which is now being presented as the choice of pupils themselves. Not wearing the headscarf has also been presented as a pupil choice. However, it was reported to us that pressure was exerted on girls who did not wear the hijab. We were informed that they would be reminded in certain Islamic Studies lessons and assemblies that “girls with morals wore the hijab.” Such incidents upset girls and particular male Muslim teachers also told them they were not good Muslim girls because they did not cover their heads. Some boys also picked up this rhetoric and repeated it.

Witnesses also told us that boys and girls were warned not to sit too close to each other at break time and if these warnings were repeatedly ignored parents were called in. In another case a male member of staff allegedly hacked into a girl’s mobile phone and informed her parents about its contents. It is clear that there is little regard for the safety and well being of girls as, arguably such actions could increase the risk of honour based violence and forced marriages. School staff have a duty to protect children from bullying and not participate in it themselves.

Violence against women including sexual violence should be condemned, yet marital rape was condoned as some boys were taught that a wife is not allowed to refuse sex. Intimidation was a feature in many of the accounts including pressure to pray. For example, in one incident posters were put on walls to say that anyone who didn’t pray was a ‘kafir’ or unbeliever, considered the worst thing that a Muslim can be accused of. Other concerns included a narrow arts curriculum, anti-Western rhetoric, discrimination and systematic pushing out of any non-Muslim and Muslim members of staff who were challenging the hardline ethos of senior management and governors.

We hope that lessons are learned and that children in the schools concerned are finally put first, through the establishment of mechanisms to prevent such incidents of malpractice happening again and by ensuring that new managers and staff understand their duties as state school educators. It is
also important to not only focus only on the tiny minority of religiously conservative Muslims who may be targeting schools as people with hardline religious views exist in all communities. We should be consistent in challenging anyone who discriminates against others because of their, gender, race, faith, disability, age and sexuality – only then can we build strong and cohesive societies.

Additional Notes

1. Contacts for Media interviews:
   Shaista Gohir MBE (Chair) – 07802 225989 / contact@shaistagohir.com

2. About Muslim Women’s Network UK: MWNUK is the only national Muslim women’s organisation in Britain and our offices are based in Birmingham. We are a women’s rights organisation with more than 600 members across the UK with a collective reach of tens of thousands of women. The website address for MWNUK is: www.mwnuk.co.uk

3. Media Ownership and Plurality: In October 2013, MWNUK responded to the government’s consultation on Media Ownership and Plurality where we highlighted the lack of balanced reporting by some sections of the media, which can be found here:
   http://www.mwnuk.co.uk/resourcesDetail.php?id=99

The second response is by Museji Ahmed Takolia in the Huffington Post, 3 July 2014:
http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/museji-ahmed-takolia/islamophobia-muslim-extremism_b_5554007.html?utm_hp_ref=uk&ir=UK

British Muslims Are Asking: Are We All Extremists Now?

How do we move on from this? Perhaps by accepting that there are in Britain socially and religiously conservative parents who are free to choose a way of life that is different from others. Indeed they have been encouraged to become active in their communities by the state. Given freedoms to design and organise new schools to help raise standards of attainment, in which some will nurture an ethos that is shared within their ‘local’ culture. In the process some may stray in important respects away from more broadly accepted (but as yet poorly defined) British values, norms and conventions. Indeed others may go further and define an ethos where cultural and religious/non-religious preferences predominate or are even used to inculcate others. They will do all this under the aegis of a free/academy school framework in most cases (but not exclusively) allowing some palpably bad behaviour to creep in, including examples of bullying and intimidation by some governors. All of which is carried out under the watchful lens of weak local accountability by the LEA. That poor governance and leadership should result in unacceptable behaviour in this context is compounded by apparently little training on offer to newly recruited governors, and evidently weak management in schools. Surely that such a multiplicity of factors should give rise to evidence in some schools of very poor practice in citizenship education and social inclusion should not be surprising. If this is the set of circumstances that defines “extremism” then our school system has problems far greater than even Ofsted can manage to expose.