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Governmental responses to Islamophobia in the UK
A two-decade retrospective

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Introduction

It is just over two decades since Islamophobia was afforded political recognition in the UK. Prompted by the publication of the 1997 Runnymede Trust report on behalf of the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia (CBMI), it straightforwardly defined Islamophobia as ‘a useful shorthand way of referring to the dread or hatred of Islam . . . and, therefore, to fear or dislike all or most Muslims’ (CBMI 1997, p. 1). Since then, Islamophobia has been an emotive issue: to advocates pressing government to address the phenomenon, Islamophobia is a growing and increasingly worrying phenomenon that has the potential to impact the everyday lives of British Muslims; to detractors – many of whom dismiss the phenomenon out of hand – it is little more than an unnecessary shield behind which Muslims deflect legitimate criticism about themselves and their religion. While not always as necessarily polarised, a similar dichotomy can be seen in the political spaces also, with politicians and political opinion veering from Islamophobia being the most serious discriminatory phenomenon of our time through to it being an unwanted consequence of the ‘problems’ associated with Muslim communities. This chapter reflects on the past two decades in the UK to consider how successive British governments have responded to Islamophobia since the publication of the CBMI report in 1997. Beginning with a short overview that affords some context about the issue of religious-based discrimination in the UK, it proceeds by first considering the New Labour government from 1997 to 2010 before second, considering the Conservative-led Coalition and Conservative majority governments from 2010 through to 2017. In conclusion, some comparisons between the different approaches will be compared.

Governmental policies before Runnymede and the CBMI

Discrimination on the basis of religion clearly precedes the political recognition afforded to Islamophobia in the late 1990s, as indeed does successive British government’s attempts to engage with different faith and religious issues. In terms of discrimination on the basis of religion specifically, this can be largely traced back to the mid-1980s when a greater political openness to more social and civic versions of religion became evident as did a
much greater impetus to tackling inequalities and discrimination within the political sphere (McLoughlin 2010). While not always apparent at the national level, a distinct shift was occurring in the more localised, urban conurbations where inequalities and discrimination were seen to be on the rise (Cooper 2004). Rather than developing new policies and legislation, there a focus emerged around extending prevailing principles of equality to newer and what would be, more controversial markers of identity including sexual orientation and religion. These went beyond the traditional markers of race, class and gender to necessarily see religion as more than mere beliefs and practices. Achieving only minor breakthroughs at the national level, the changes did leave a legacy on political thinking.

Change was catalysed with the fallout from the Satanic Verses affair, prompting some to call for religious discrimination to be made unlawful while also extending blasphemy laws to include other religions. For Weller (2006), this acted as both lightning rod and magnifying glass for Britain’s Muslims. As he explains, the lightning rod galvanised communities and organisations to employ religion as a marker of individual and corporate identity while the magnifying glass began the process greater political and public scrutiny being placed on Muslims, their communities and organisations. Soon after in 1991, the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) gave its support to calls for protection to be afforded on the basis of religious markers: ‘it is at present within the law to incite hatred against a religious community and to discriminate against a person because of their religion, unless affiliation to a religion happens to be recognised as membership of an ethnic group’ (cited in Blakemore and Drake 1996, p. 115). With little evidence to substantiate the claims, the calls had little impact politically. Nonetheless, bolstered by the CRE the UK Action Committee on Islamic Affairs (UKACIA) pursued the issue, publishing a report in 1993 entitled, Muslims and the Law in Multi-Faith Britain: the Need for Reform. Focusing on the 1975 White Paper on racial discrimination, UKACIA called for comparative protection on the basis of religion to be legislated for (Weller 2006). As before though, UKACIA was unable to provide evidence to support its calls and so again, the report had little political impact. In response, the CRE conducted a survey of agencies that dealt with complaints of religious discrimination to try and gather the necessary evidence. Evidence was again not forthcoming, this time due to the low numbers of responses received (Weller 2006).

That same year, the Anti-Discrimination (Amendment) Act 1994 was introduced which extended levels of protection afforded to ethnic groups under the Race Relations Act (RRA) 1976 to mono-ethnic religious groups, namely Jews and Sikhs. While the legislation did not extend protection to Muslims – due to them being multi-ethnic – some specific interest about Islamophobia began to emerge. Published by the Runnymede Trust, the Commission on Anti-Semitism’s report noted that not only were levels of religious discrimination increasing but so too were the perpetrators identifying new targets, those new targets being Muslims. While the report failed to provide any concrete evidence to support its claims, it did name this new trend in religious discrimination as Islamophobia. In response, the CBMI was established and three years later its report, Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All was published (CBMI 1997). According to Weller, this ‘moved the terms of the debate quite significantly’ given that it ‘introduced into public discourse the notion that, alongside shared dynamics of discriminatory experience, there may also be particularities of Muslim experience signalled by the word “Islamophobia”’ (Weller 2006, p. 306). Setting out 60 recommendations for both national and local government as so the voluntary and private sectors, the report intended to initiate ‘decisive action’ across the education, employment, health and housing sectors as also the media (CBMI 1997, p. iii). As noted previously, while the report undoubtedly shaped subsequent understandings about what Islamophobia was and what was meant by it, its recommendations had much less impact (Allen 2010). This was evident at the report’s launch when the then Home Secretary,
Jack Straw, rejected two of the report’s major recommendations, relating to equity for state-funded faith-schools and specific legislation to protect against Islamophobia (ibid.). Despite the report identifying Islamophobia as a distinct discriminatory phenomenon, Straw instead conflated manifestations of Islamophobia with manifestations of ‘racial’ violence by suggesting that addressing the latter would somehow address the former. From the outset then, New Labour did not appear to recognise Islamophobia as distinct and different, something that seemingly influenced and shaped its ensuing thinking and approaches about Islamophobia throughout the rest of its time in government.

New Labour approaches to Islamophobia

Despite being associated with the now infamous phrase ‘we don’t do god’ (Allen 2011c), the New Labour government was more open to faith and religion than its predecessor. For Gilliat-Ray (2004), Prime Minister Tony Blair’s language of ‘social inclusion’ went beyond material wealth and poverty to incorporate wider notions relating to citizenship and equality of opportunity among others. The capacity for faith groups to provide voluntary services was crucial to this not least because it attributed religion and religious communities with a new sense of economic viability (ibid.). There were other drivers underpinning New Labour’s greater receptivity to religion and faith also including among others: the rising levels of social deprivation experienced by some religious communities (Anwar and Bakhsh 2003; Woodhead 2010); demographic changes necessitating the establishment of non-historical religious traditions in the UK (Davie 1994; Bruce 1996); and an increasing number of people choosing to identify themselves by their religion (Oliver-Dee 2009). For Harris et al. (2003, p. 96), there was also ‘the personal moral and Christian commitment of several members of the government including the prime minister’. And of course, there was a clear recognition of the potential growth of anti-Muslim and anti-Islam attitudes post-9/11 (CBMI 2004; Allen 2007). For McLoughlin (2003), this was the single most important driver, prompting unprecedented levels of engagement with Muslim communities via Muslim organisations in particular, the Muslim Council of Britain.

In terms of addressing religious discrimination as opposed to Islamophobia specifically, New Labour was active. First, the introduction of the Human Rights Act 1998, which established the freedom of religion or belief for all citizens within the British constitution. Second the commissioning of research into religious discrimination a year later which led to a report being published in 2001, titled Religious Discrimination in England and Wales (Weller et al. 2001). Given that previous endeavours to better understand religious discrimination had failed to have political impact due to a lack of supporting evidence, so this was an extremely positive development. However, despite the majority of Muslim respondents believing hostility and abuse directed towards them had risen, there was some disquiet among certain sectors of Muslim communities, critical of the failure to be specific about what Muslims were experiencing and to name this Islamophobia (Weller 2006, pp. 307–308). Nonetheless, recommendations were made to address religious discrimination including the extension of one or more pieces of race relations legislation, the HRA or the largely defunct blasphemy laws (Allen 2017). The creation of new laws – both specific and generic – was also recommended, prompting a further government commissioned report in 2001 entitled, Tackling Religious Discrimination: Practical Implications for Policy-Makers and Legislators (Hepple and Choudhury 2001). From the outset, therefore, New Labour appeared determined to better evidence religious discrimination.

While progress was seemingly being made, it is worth noting that such investigations were taking place against the backdrop of 9/11 and the reality that there had been a sharp increase in Islamophobic incidents targeted against Muslims in Britain (Allen and Nielsen 2002).
New Labour’s John Denham did acknowledge this, noting the spectre of a cancer-like Islamophobia having the potential to spread through British society (Allen 2010). Denham’s statement was however somewhat anomalous in the New Labour canon. Whether inadvertently or otherwise, New Labour rarely specifically referred to or spoke about Islamophobia. Instead, New Labour’s focus appeared to shift away from addressing discrimination on the basis of religion to the need to protect British society from the threat posed by Al Qaeda inspired terrorism (Allen 2013). Consequently, when it did refer to Islamophobia – as also religious discrimination and religiously-motivated hate more widely – it did so within the discursive frame of increased security, counter-terror and the need to tackle Islamist extremism. So when New Labour introduced legislation to protect those at risk from assault or abuse on the basis of their religion – not specifically Muslims it is necessary to stress – it did so via the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001. In doing so, it extended existing legislative protections against violence to religious communities. This was supported by extending sentencing provisions for offences aggravated by hostility towards victims because of their religion (as well as sexual orientation or disability) via the Criminal Justice Act 2003 and making an offence of using threatening words or behaviour with the intention of stirring up hatred on the basis of religion through the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006. Any specific reference to Islamophobia however remained invisible.

Where Muslims and Islam did feature as regards New Labour was within the policy discourses linked to counter-terror, security and tackling extremism, something that become even more pronounced following the London attacks on 7/7. A full and critical analysis of governmental approaches to tackling extremism can be found in Kundnani’s, A Decade Lost: Rethinking Radicalisation and Extremism (Kundnani 2015). Nonetheless, whether New Labour were seeking to curtail and control radical preachers, proscribe extremist groups, or introduce new offences including acts preparatory to or encouraging of terrorism and disseminating terrorist publications, research shows that this undue focus on Muslims and their communities reinforced many of the public’s fears and anxieties (Briggs et al. 2006; Khan 2009). These fears and anxieties were further reinforced by the media where in the aftermath of 7/7, the amount of news stories and reports about Muslims and Islam were shown to have grown exponentially, by more than 260 per cent in the preceding decade (Allen et al. 2007). More worrying was that more than 90 per cent of that coverage focused on matters relating to violence, conflict and terrorism.

History may offer an interesting insight into why New Labour policy took the direction it did. Both Solomos (1989) and Ratcliffe (2004) write about the close relationship former Labour governments discursively made between race relations and immigration. For Ratcliffe (2004), despite introducing the RRA 1968, the Labour government at the time wanted to be seen to be tough on immigration and so introduced the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1968 as a counterbalance at the same time; similar too the Race Relations Act 1965 and the 1965 White Paper on Commonwealth Immigrants.

To what extent then did New Labour feel the need to be ‘tough’ on counter-terror and extremism in the same way that it had immigration previously? There is of course the argument that it was the political situation which dictated this rather more than any given political ideology. Nonetheless, two quite disparate social issues did become linked during New Labour’s time in government resulting in a particularistic Islamophobia seemingly being lost or at least seen to be consequential of terror atrocities. In this respect, the last recorded occasion of Islamophobia being specifically referred to by New Labour is somewhat indicative. During an interview for the Muslim News, the then Prime Minister Gordon Brown stated that his government was determined to address Islamophobia if it won a further term in government. While welcomed, the interview was about New Labour’s proposed counter-terror policies and legislation and how Muslim communities had a role to play in them.
While Brown stated towards the end of New Labour’s term that his government had been committed to addressing Islamophobia, little evidence supports this. One way he maybe believed this was going to be achieved was in the overseeing of the broadening of the equalities framework, one that extended protection against discrimination on the basis of age, sexual orientation and religion or belief (and none). Described as a ‘radical change’ by Riddell and Watson (2011, p. 191), New Labour introduced legislative protection on the basis of religion or belief or the first time under the Equality Act 2006 before being further strengthened by the Equality Act 2010. Building on the European Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003 which extended protection across all forms of employment against discrimination, harassment and victimisation, the 2006 Act also established the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), a non-departmental public body with responsibility for the promotion and enforcement of equality and non-discrimination laws in England, Scotland and Wales. As with Weller’s research half a decade previous however, some Muslims were once again unhappy that Islamophobia appeared to have been ignored or at least overlooked in the developments around the broadening equalities framework. Rarely if indeed ever mentioned by the politicians and policymakers overseeing the changes, outputs from the EHRC have since reflected this, Islamophobia receiving scant attention, as in a 2010 report, Religion or Belief: Identifying Issues and Priorities (Woodhead 2010). It is also worth noting that despite the EHRC monitoring issues of discrimination on the basis of religion or belief, it continues not to disaggregate its data by the religion of victims thereby creating a situation where identifying who is being discriminated against becomes extremely difficult to ascertain.

What impact, if indeed any, the paucity of acknowledgment for Islamophobia as a specific phenomenon had is questionable. As research published at the end of New Labour’s term in government shows, over the period of it being in power, more people in Britain came to believe that Muslims were likely to encounter prejudice on the basis of their religion (Allen 2013). More so, 83% felt that the levels of prejudice Muslims experienced were higher than five years beforehand. Public attitudes towards Muslims and Islam also detrimentally changed during New Labour’s government as highlighted by the 2009–2010 British Social Attitudes Survey. Not only did Muslims emerge as the least popular religious community in the UK but more than half of respondents said that they would be bothered by a large mosque being built in their local area. In comparison, only 15% stated they would feel similar if it was a large church (National Centre for Social Research 2010). Such findings are not Islamophobic per se although they are indicative of a changing landscape within which public attitudes were shown to be becoming increasingly negative towards Muslims and Islam. And this was felt by Muslims themselves who at the end of New Labour’s time in government were shown to be the most likely to fear attack due to the colour of their skin, race or religion (Allen 2013). Of those who were victims, nearly half believed this to be perpetrated on the basis of their religion. Despite the introduction of new legislation as also the extensive broadening of the equalities framework therefore, Muslims continued to feel that more needed to be done (Allen 2013).

In reflecting on the New Labour years therefore, it must be concluded that it remained unconvinced of Islamophobia as a particularistic or distinct discriminatory phenomenon. Seemingly evident from the outset, New Labour instead seemed convinced that such discrimination was founded on markers of religion or belief as opposed to Islam and Muslim-ness more specifically. Likewise, New Labour also appeared to be unconvinced that the drivers, characteristics and manifestations of Islamophobia were also particularistic or distinct. This then is why it would seem that New Labour chose to introduce no specific policies or legislation to specifically address Islamophobia or even routinely speak about or refer to it in any specific ways during its three terms of government. While tackling discrimination and inequality were
of paramount concern therefore, New Labour’s approach focused on broadening the existing equalities framework to encompass a greater number of markers against which discrimination might be perpetrated. By tackling the problem broadly and generally, the expectation was that this would address the specific and the particular. While there may be some rationale for adopting such an approach, it does overlook the fact that during the period of time that New Labour was broadening the equalities framework much was happening – nationally and internationally – that was both specific and particular to Muslims and the religion of Islam.

**Conservative-led approaches to tackling Islamophobia**

If speaking about or referring to Islamophobia as a specific and distinct phenomenon was rare under New Labour, the opposite has been largely true of Conservative-led governments. This is maybe surprising given the Conservative-led Coalition stated that equality issues would not be a priority soon after returning to power in 2010 (Riddell and Watson 2011, p. 194). Unlike New Labour however, the Coalition did not appear to see Islamophobia as a discriminatory phenomenon that readily sat within the equalities framework. This was evident in the first speech made by a member of the Coalition about Islamophobia, the 2011 speech in London by the then co-chair of the Conservative Party, Baroness Sayeeda Warsi. Having previously announced the Coalition was a government that ‘did god’, Warsi stated that Islamophobia had passed ‘the dinner table test’ whereby the expression of anti-Muslim sentiment and attitudes had become socially acceptable through conversational civility (Batty 2011). For her, ordinary British people – especially the middle classes – were increasingly becoming comfortable saying things about Muslims they would feel uncomfortable saying about other minorities. Without doubt, Warsi’s speech put the issue of Islamophobia firmly on the political and public radar soon after the Coalition came to power.

Two developments further illustrate how the Coalition and Conservative-majority governments since sought to adopt a different approach to New Labour. First was the establishment of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Islamophobia in 2010; second, the establishment of the Cross-Government Working Group on Anti-Muslim Hatred in 2012. As well as acknowledging that Islamophobia was particularistic and distinctly different from other discriminatory phenomena, the Coalition clearly seemed to prefer the approach previously adopted to address Anti-Semitism what with it previously having had an APPG and working group. It is interesting to however that while the APPG referred to Islamophobia, the Cross-Government Working Group did not. It is anecdotally believed that this was in response to a report published by the Quilliam Foundation which stated that the alleged confusion associated with the term Islamophobia had been exploited by ‘Islamists and Wahhabs’; using the term, it went on, handed a ‘propaganda coup to Islamists’ (Readings et al. 2011, p. 14). Whether correct or otherwise, it is interesting to note how the term Islamophobia continued to create contestation even for a government that had previously and openly spoken about it. While so, since the end of the Coalition, many in the political spaces have again begun to prefer the term Islamophobia.

While these developments appear to show a clear departure from the approach adopted by New Labour, it might be suggested that things would have changed irrespective of who had won the 2010 General Election. This is because the push to establish the APPG on Islamophobia began with a closed parliamentary meeting in March 2010, thereby pre-dating the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition. Likewise, APPGs are informal cross-party groups that have no official status within Parliament and so have no formal endorsement from the government at the time. Run by and for Members of the Commons and Lords however, many do also involve individuals and organisations from outside Parliament in their
administration and activities. As such, the APPG was not a development of the Coalition government nor was it established by it. Nonetheless, the APPG on Islamophobia was launched in November 2010 with a remit to: investigate the forms, manifestations and extent of discrimination against Muslims in today’s Britain; review the effectiveness of relevant legislation; review existing mechanisms for recording anti-Muslim hate crimes; and, investigate the role of the media in fostering intolerance towards Muslims (Allen 2017). As before, this was very similar to the aims of the APPG on Anti- and would seek to inform and influence government via the Cross-Government Working Group that was to be established in 2012.

As with all things relating to Islamophobia however, the APPG was soon dogged by controversy. Following the appointment of iENGAGE (a London-based Muslim organisation that is also sometimes referred to as ENGAGE) as the APPG’s Secretariat, a number of the APPG’s Parliamentarians publicly resigned in protest including the Chair and Vice-Chair, Conservative MP Kris Hopkins and Lord Janner of Braunstone respectively. While a full narrative of events can be found in Allen’s (2011a) report, A Momentous Occasion, the APPG’s members removed iENGAGE as Secretariat in 2011 before re-launching it. Achieving tentative cross-party support it began to fashion a work programme. Progress since has been extremely slow however. Despite a number of hearings having since been organised – on education, the media and responses to the murder of Lee Rigby in May 2013 among others – the APPG’s activities have been incoherent and lacking strategic purpose. Unsurprisingly therefore, there have been no outputs from the APPG, not even transcripts or records of the evidence presented at any of the hearings. Despite broadly reflecting the approach adopted to address anti-Semitism – where the APPG collected evidence and produced formal outputs including a series of recommendations to Parliament and policymakers – the APPG on Islamophobia failed in this respect. While on the one hand therefore the APPGs on Islamophobia and Anti-Semitism were initially similar, the respective development and impact of the two could not have been any more different. In this respect, it is unclear whether the APPG on Islamophobia still exists especially as in the summer of 2017 a new APPG on British Muslims emerged that appears to have been undertaking many similar activities to the Islamophobia equivalent previously.

The Cross-Government Working Group on Anti-Muslim Hate was established in January 2012 with the intention of working closely with the APPG on a number of common themes (Allen 2017) and was made up of different members including representatives from Muslim and civil society organisations as also an imam and academics all of whom were said to have had relevant expertise in the field. Unlike the APPG, the Working Group appeared well structured and quickly moved towards developing a work programme. The priority goals included the need to strengthen the evidence base for Islamophobia, challenge the role of the media, increase the reporting and recording of Islamophobia, and better understand and subsequently respond to Islamophobia online. As part of this, various sub-groups were created within which different members were charged to use their respective expertise. While so, one of the criticisms posited at the Working Group was that there was very little external engagement, both in terms of more traditional outputs and in establishing a public face thereby enabling the Group to comment and respond to appropriate events and junctures. Despite some high profile resignations from academic members shortly before the end of the Coalition’s term of government (Allen 2014; Goodwin 2015), the Working Group appears to have continued to exist under the two Conservative-majority governments that have followed. While so, the same criticisms remain valid: there would still appear to be no formal outputs from the Working Group and very few people not connected with it are aware of its existence.

Reflecting on the activities of the Working Group over the past few years, a number of opportunities to make a positive impact as regards addressing Islamophobia would appear to
have been either lost or simply missed. This is apparent in terms of informal or non-direct developments. So while the Working Group supported the establishment of the first Srebrenica Genocide Memorial Day in 2013, and showed support for initiatives such as the Big Iftar, not only is it unclear the extent to which these fitted with the initial terms of reference of the Working Group but, more importantly, what impact these had in specifically addressing or reducing levels of Islamophobia. The Working Group also missed opportunities to raise awareness of its work publicly. So while the terms of reference stated that the Working Group would respond to local or international events, there is little evidence to suggest that it did, failing to make any public statement whatsoever in relation to the planting of three nail bombs outside mosques in the West Midlands, the murder of Mohammed Saleem in Birmingham, the allegations that Muslims were plotting to infiltrate and ‘take-over’ a number of Birmingham schools (coined Operation Trojan Horse), and the attack on the Finsbury Park Mosque in the summer of 2017 among others. Sadly, all happened and went without the Working Group making any public response whatsoever.

Beyond the APPG and Working Group, there is one more recent development worthy of note in terms of the way in which Islamophobia has been approached and understood. While at the start of its time in government, the Conservative-led Coalition appeared to be ready to speak about and refer to Islamophobia as a specific phenomenon, in recent years – and while being a Conservative-majority – this would appear to have shifted. As with its New Labour predecessor, subsequent Conservative governments have begun to frame Islamophobia within the context of security, counter-terror and matters of extremism. First evident in the publication of the Extremism Task Force report in December 2013, the most recent example followed the van attack on the Finsbury Park Mosque in 2017 and the response by Prime Minister Theresa May, who categorically stated that Islamophobia was a form of extremism as opposed to hate or discrimination. The flaws of this approach can be seen by reflecting on the previous Task Force report. Commissioned in the wake of Lee Rigby’s murder in May 2013, the report stated that it was necessary to tackle ‘extremism of all kinds, including the Islamophobia and neo-Nazism espoused by the murderer of Mohammed Saleem to justify his terrorist attacks against mosques in the West Midlands’ (Extremism Task Force 2013, p. 1). While commendable, it was the only reference in the entire report relating specifically to Islamophobia. Since then, little has been done to tackle Islamophobia as a form of extremism – or indeed anything else – as indeed has been the same since the Finsbury Park Mosque attack. Linking Islamophobia with extremism is therefore as misguided as it is insignificant.

Conclusion

While the Conservative-led governments’ approaches to Islamophobia have been at times commendable and promising, it is questionable the extent to which they had any more impact on addressing Islamophobia than its New Labour predecessor. In some ways this is maybe more disappointing than it was under New Labour. While New Labour failed to recognise Islamophobia as a stand-alone, particularistic phenomenon, the Coalition and Conservatives clearly did thereby prompting the quick establishment of bodies that would investigate and duly respond. As is evident with the APPG and Working Group however, both have – for different reasons – been largely impotent. Failing to address or respond to significant events and developments to have occurred during their respective lifespans, the validity and worth of the APPG and Working Group must now be seriously questioned. Given the lack of dynamism shown over the past two decades in the British political spaces to seriously tackle Islamophobia, the worry is that the issue will merely fall off the political and policy radar. If so, then it is
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difficult to see a similar opportunity being made available in the foreseeable future: why would future governments commit to supporting something that has already been shown to fail? In this respect the past two decades might be seen as a major opportunity lost and one that may be looked back on in the future with significant regret. That regret may be felt even more acutely when it would appear – taking into account both the qualitative and quantitative data currently available – that Islamophobia continues to be on the increase.

In terms of definition and evidence, there is little difference between New Labour and the Conservatives except, that is, in terms of conception. For New Labour, Islamophobia was a manifestation of discrimination based on markers of religion that in turn, could be readily incorporated within broader understandings of equalities and religion. By extending existing legislation therefore, it believed that this would afford suitable protection to other – and newer – forms of discrimination. Questions remain however because as research has shown, a significant driver for New Labour in its early years was the belief that Islamophobia was on the rise (Allen 2010, 2011b; Allen and Nielsen 2002). Why then did it not feature more particularly and prominently in political and policy discourses? As public attitudes towards Muslims and Islam also deteriorated over New Labour’s terms of government, such an approach might therefore be deemed to have failed. It is worth noting however that policy and legislation do not in themselves change public attitudes, they merely curb certain behaviours (Daniels and Macdonald 2005). Likewise Blakemore and Drake, who note that equalities policies ‘will not change the world’, adding, ‘they were never designed to... the policies were designed to win majority consent rather than to force change’ (Blakemore and Drake 1996, p. 210). As such, maybe New Labour’s equalities approach was a means to winning ‘majority consent’.

Under the Conservatives, a clear shift away from aligning or incorporating Islamophobia with and within equalities has been evident not least in the greater alignment with the approach adopted as regards Anti-Semitism. In this way, Islamophobia – as Anti-Semitism before it – would appear to have been seen as rather more exceptional and extraordinary. Under the Conservatives, Islamophobia – at times expressed as anti-Muslim hatred – was spoken about and referred to as having distinct and differentiable features and characteristics: particularistic. Under New Labour, this was quite the opposite, far more generalistic, ordinary and not at all exceptional from other discriminatory phenomena. There are some good reasons for perceiving Islamophobia in this way. The first relates to the historical roots of Islamophobia’s emergence and the first acknowledgement of it in the Runnymede Trust report exploring contemporary anti-Semitism. Second, in the past two decades Islamophobia has been preferred by far-right and neo-Nazi groups as the ideology of choice, substituting Islamophobia in preference of traditional anti-Jewish and anti-Judaism ideologies. For the Coalition, therefore, maybe it saw a better argument for perceiving and subsequently seeking to address Islamophobia in line with anti-Semitism rather than other discriminatory phenomena such as racism and homophobia.

There also needs to be some reflection on the political discourses and settings of New Labour and the Conservatives. For New Labour – as also the Conservatives latterly – a strong discursive link was made and subsequently reiterated between those associated to tackling of religiously-motivated prejudice, discrimination and crimes with the discourses associated with terror and security. As Becker et al. (2012) among others have noted, discourses are widely recognised as tools with which politicians routinely introduce, affirm, reiterate and reinforce policy and thinking but so too embed unwritten and unofficial policies and thinking also. This linking therefore has the potential to have a detrimental impact. First, in reinforcing the public’s pre-existing fears and anxieties about Muslims and Islam; second, in placing Muslims and their communities under greater pressure through more scrutiny and questioning, a consequence of which is the potential for greater feelings of anger, alienation, mistrust, and even increase the likelihood of
radicalisation (Briggs et al. 2006; Khan 2009). Set against a discursive backdrop of those such as Jack Straw’s suggestion that the wearing of the niqab – full-face covering – presented a barrier to integration (Allen 2010), John Reid’s requesting Muslim families look for ‘tell-tale’ signs of extremism in their children (Allen 2013), and the Department of Education requesting universities to ‘spy’ on students vulnerable to extremist ideologies (Allen 2010, 2013), the policy discourse of New Labour was not always differentiable from some of the more explicit discourses emanating from the populist far-right: for instance, the BNP and EDL. One might even question the extent to which New Labour’s discourses attributed greater legitimacy to the far-right especially given its unprecedented growth during the three terms of New Labour government.

While the early years of government as part of the Coalition may have been marked by a more positive and specific discourse about Islamophobia, recent discourses and narratives put forward by the Conservatives have had a much greater resonance with New Labour. As both the 2013 Extremism Task Force report and the post-Finsbury Park Mosque attack speech by Theresa May also highlight, Islamophobia remains linked with counter-terror and extremism. Maybe successive governments have viewed extremism and terror to be of greater import than Islamophobia in terms of its wider societal impact. Maybe they were far more cynical, making timely statements about Islamophobia as a means by which to co-opt and bring ‘on side’ Muslims and their communities. The evidence available here offers little beyond mere speculation and so it is recommended that a more systematic review of the political discourses of both the Conservative and New Labour governments about the Muslim ‘Other’ and the ‘problems’ attributed to them be undertaken. What emerges then is a complex and contested picture, one that appears to be somewhat confused. The ‘momentous occasion’ spoken about at the APPG’s 2011 launch now appears overblown, the opportunity to address Islamophobia appearing to have been lost. In this respect, it would seem highly unlikely that in the UK Islamophobia will be suitably and appropriately addressed in the foreseeable future.

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