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b:RAP briefing

no. 8

Islamophobia: Echoes of the past?

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Introducing b:RAP briefings

This is the 8th in a continuing series of **b:RAP briefings**. The purpose of these briefings is to examine key issues in public policy *from a clear and practical race equality perspective*.

While some briefings will cover topics that have a very clear and evident relationship to race equality others will take less obvious issues and examine them afresh, teasing out the race equality dimension.

Each briefing will identify the key issues involved, highlight current trends in thinking and recommend practical action and solutions.

Joy Warmington

Chief Executive, b:RAP

October 2005

b:RAP Briefings

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Briefing No. 5	'Myth and Maxim': myth busting report on asylum seekers and refugees
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Briefing No.7	Community Cohesion and Asylum

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'Those who forget the past are doomed to relive it in the future'

(George Santayana)

Rationale

This paper is a response to the recent and more overt panic-fuelled hysteria around Islam and 'Muslims', which we think is reminiscent of the inaccurate and dangerous portrayal of Jewish communities during the Nazi occupation. We argue that there is a disturbingly similar trajectory, associated with widespread xenophobic sentiment, which occurs when a number of variables come into play: economic crisis / poverty, welfare retrenchment / scarcity of resources and the fear of a cultural invasion or indeed 'religious take-over'. Lest we forget the lessons history has taught us, we think it is important to hear the echoes of a past we vowed never to repeat.

Introduction

At the time of writing this paper, the poignancy of this lesson was again made real as we reflected upon the horrors visited upon the Jewish community less than a century ago. What have we truly learnt?

The 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz found us asking an unsettling question: how have we, once again, lost sight of our humanity and become willing, collectively, to offer up our neighbours as 'sacrificial lambs' on the altar of racism and all its ensuing horrors?

During the Auschwitz Memorial Day, across Europe, one could hear the uttering of a 60 year old proclamation: 'never again'. Many re-confirmed their collective commitment to honour that very proclamation. We remained unconvinced.

Whilst many of us, including our politicians and journalists, self-righteously lambasted the Nazis for their acts of terror, we simultaneously observed a continued emanation of anti-foreigner sentiment from those very quarters. The exaggerated and distorted views on asylum seekers, migrants and particular faith groups seemed disturbingly reminiscent of the types of propaganda reeled out by the Nazi machine.

Unconvinced? Let us then focus both on how it was that the Nazi party reached its zenith, pre 1945, and compare its distorted views to those currently being articulated.

Historical context

Surprisingly, the Nazi's vilification of Jews is rooted in an obscure satire on Napoleon III, entitled '*A Dialogue in Hell between Montesquieu and Machiavelli*'. Though this text made no reference to the Jewish community, it was later re-worked to make use of its conspiratorial elements and framed in such a way as to refer to the Jews. The text then became known as the '*Protocols of the Elders of Zion*'. The book was used as an influential anti-Semitic tool and often referred to by Hitler in *Mein Kampf*. The book later captured the collective imagination of a country, which was all too willing to take its views as the gospel truth. Why?

In 1929 economic chaos engulfed Germany. Levels of unemployment climbed from 10% in 1928 to 44% in 1932. The social security system also collapsed. It was during this period that the Nazi party made its first electoral breakthrough, collecting six and a half million votes, and as the Depression deepened, support for the Nazis also increased. However, economics alone do not explain the Nazis' appeal. By describing their vision of an Aryan nation, which clearly delineated

those with an entitlement to citizenship, the Nazis explicitly linked nationhood to ethnic identity, expressed as religious identity. Does this then give us a better understanding of the 'mechanics' that help accelerate racist discourse and its harmful effects?

The Nazis used the economic crisis as a platform from which to pedal their illogical anti-Jewish rhetoric. It was a perfect opportunity to use the Jewish community as a scapegoat on which all of society's ills could be blamed. The *'Protocols of the Elders of Zion'*, made reference to a Jewish conspiracy to take over Germany's financial base and propounded further irrational and unfounded beliefs such as, for example, that Jews used the blood of Christian children during Passover. As a consequence, the Jewish community was seen as an unwelcome presence, which had ensured its economic rights over a country that had been plunged into poverty and whose citizens would need to be ever mindful of the 'menacing' presence of the Rabbi and his family.

Echoes of the past

Have we witnessed the recrudescence of such exaggerated and dangerous beliefs in modern times? Islamophobia seems to have become a ubiquitous concept, one that has emerged as a counter-response to the distorted perceptions of Islam post 9/11. Current 'Islam bashing' seems to have reached unprecedented levels, with racist attacks against 'Bin Laden look-alikes' reported across Europe and north- America. Our tabloids continue to warn us about the ever-growing 'threat' of Islam and its inbred fanaticism, closed off communities and un-progressive values. Simultaneously, our government rolls back centuries old legislation, which had enshrined the virtues of 'innocent until proven guilty' and moved instead to locking up the 'menacing' threat, based on suspicion alone. Such

knee jerk reactions not only have no merit, but have also engendered a 'culture of fear' that, mixed with a strong dose of 'stranger danger' discourse, produces a lethal cocktail seemingly capable of poisoning the collective imagination. Our 'shining' and once impenetrable monolithic tributes to *modernity* and *progress*: capitalism and democracy, could, according to the harbingers of Islamic doom, come crashing down around us as easily as did our once monolithic tributes to *economic prowess* and *success*: the twin towers.

As such, mutated parodies seem to be the order of the day. Our fears over the stranger lurking in the shadows have been assigned to all who practise Islam, based on one horrendous act carried out by a few - whose philosophy and practice was at odds with the majority. Extreme opinions have entered the public domain and have been legitimised to such an extent that almost 'anything goes'. We have thus witnessed the gross misrepresentation of the beliefs and practices of a religious community. Bereft of the rigours of objectivity we entertain parodies that once would have clearly been labelled as unadulterated jingoism, yet now are seen as 'common sense'. The modern day bogeyman is the 'bogus Imam', who presents the frightening prospects of both indoctrination and 'jihad'. If we add to that our fears over other foreign strangers, we can parody the perceived image of the transit van asylum seeker - 'the welfare bandit' - lurking in the shadows ready to pounce and grab our pots of benefits! As ridiculous as the comparisons may seem, they are not far from the polemical citations written in our newspapers or articulated by our politicians, and resemble the racist ideas used by the Nazis against the Jews. Although our economy may, according to the current government, be healthier and more buoyant than many a long year, this is not the lived experience of many. The growing gap between the affluent and the poor in our society feeds the hostility between groups who, ironically, find themselves in very

similar, deprived circumstances. Nevertheless, in the UK, and echoing history, the economic fears and the demise of the Welfare State have led to a questioning both of who belongs - filtered through the lens of nationality - and therefore of who is entitled to benefit? Once again, ethnicity and religion have been conflated.

Lessons from history

What does this teach us? If we revisit the first question we posed and simultaneously explore the 'mechanics' that help accelerate racist discourse and its harmful effects, we find an underlying factor that seems to exacerbate xenophobia: nationalism. Nationalism has always existed, yet at specific times in history we have witnessed a concerted effort to 'galvanise' the ethnic majority to re-assert their rights over and above those of others. How this happens and why it leads to an unquestioning affiliation to ethnic identity and mobilisation are questions yet to be answered.

The less acceptable face of nationalism seems to emerge at times of perceived greater anxiety, insecurity and economic risk. The 'utopian' ideals of a fortress nation, closed off to the outside world, resurface. It is no coincidence that the Nazis were able to exert such influence at a time when the economic slump meant that German citizens and their politicians adopted an isolationist and protectionist world view, which meant that many 'ordinary' German citizens turned their backs on the Jewish community and colluded in its decimation. Similarly, if we focus on the current issues in the UK, we see that the resurgence of nationalistic sentiment follows the perceived final erosion of both state sovereignty and the Welfare State. The twin threats of both an unwelcome alien presence and its demands on already struggling public services have meant that the lessons from history have been hidden from sight. It thus comes as no surprise that once again we

scapegoat and turn our backs on the many much maligned communities and tolerate, or indeed accept, the panic fuelled hysteria created by the likes of the BNP.

If we become complacent we could find ourselves repeating a history we had vowed never to revisit.