

PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY: Islamophobia and the War on Terror

November 18, 2006 London

On Saturday, November 18th the Stop the War Coalition held a conference on Islamophobia. In his introduction Andrew Burgin said that the defence of our civil liberties is now the chief issue in domestic policy, as the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan is the chief issue of foreign policy, with Islamophobia the last resort of the warmongers.

I have tried to give a flavour of the diversity of speakers and organisations, editing down talks of roughly ten minutes each. I therefore haven't repeated similar remarks but included speakers' unique contributions to the debate. Not all speakers are précised here. You can listen to the complete speeches of those underlined below by going to www.stopwar.org.uk/Islamophobia.htm

There were three sessions, each focusing on different aspects of Islamophobia and how they are linked to the war on terror. The first session was on **The War on Terror and its Consequences**

TONY BENN argued that there is no War on Terror, but a war on Iraq, a war on Afghanistan and a threat of war on Iran. He had been looking at the history of US imperialism. Between 1898 and 1934, the US Marines attacked their neighbours 200 times, many repetitively: Cuba, 4 times; Mexico, 4 times; the Dominican Republic, 4 times, etc. British support for US foreign policy, was a pretense in the hope of reviving a British empire. To Blair and his friends, a 'moderate' Muslim was a Muslim who didn't really mind we've invaded his country. Benn was more frightened of Britain being taken over by John Reid than by Al-Qaeda. It was a crime to waste money on a criminal, unwinnable war

JEAN LAMBERT (Green Party MEP) maintained that the UK seems to consider the defence of human rights as excessively restrictive. This government has passed 27 pieces of legislation with 12 more in the pipeline. Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions is an absolute prohibition on cruel, degrading treatment and torture, yet the UK and the US have allowed these practices to prevail. They have compromised our international obligations by sending people back to countries that torture and by refusing to stand up for British residents in Guantanamo. Free speech for opponents is threatened. Multiculturalism is under attack and 'Islam' is used as an insult, conflated with front page headlines about asylum seekers and immigration, creating a climate of distrust and fear. There seems to be an obsession with what women are wearing, with what women are NOT showing – an interesting twist. And while shutting down public debate, they are privatising public spaces so that there aren't places for communities to come together and express alternative views.

ANAS AL-TIKRITI said that we must not forsake any section of the community. On 10 November, the head of MI5, Dame Manningham-Buller said there were 100,000 Muslims who support terrorism. The next day, Ian Blair, head of the Metropolitan Police, mentioned the figure of 120,000 and day following, Andrew Marr asked David Davis on Sunday morning television, "Is it true that there are 200,000 Muslims who support terrorism?" In three days this number had doubled. The Intelligence Services don't know what they're talking about. The government tells parents to spy on their children, teachers to rat on their students, imams to report on their congregations. Nick Griffin is acquitted of incitement to racial hatred, while Abu Hamza is in prison for saying the same kinds of things. They are trying to create a consensus that 'Muslims' are a danger to society. The government encourages the hysteria. Meanwhile everyone agrees that the Palestinian issue has gone on too long. The problem is of a POLITICAL nature, not a religious one.

LINDSAY GERMAN talked about the origins of the Stop the War Coalition and how a vital part of the initial programme was to fight the inevitable backlash on the Muslim community arising from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Assimilation was not the answer. The Jews in Germany were the most highly assimilated in Europe. They were the bankers, the doctors, the businessman, the lawyers in Weimar Germany; many were secular Jews, yet when the Nazis came to power, that was no protection against the 'final solution'. She pointed out that the media and government pronouncements today were the same as that used in the 30s with the only difference being the use of 'Muslim' instead of Jew. This was basically war propaganda.

MOAZZEM BEGG gave an insight into his experiences in captivity, in Pakistan and then Guantanamo Bay. He talked about the use of torture to get information which was suspect and totally compromised by the way in which it had been extracted. He said what frightened him most was that he would admit some lie or name a name under torture which would be used as justification for the invasion of Iraq. 'Military intelligence' is an oxymoron. You can't be military and intelligent at the same time. He stressed the importance of the anti-war movement. He heard about the 2 million strong demonstration on 15 February 2003 in his cell in Guantanamo. He was told by a US military guard (with Republican Party sympathies) and it was the first ray of hope in years.

The second session was on **Resisting War and Islamophobia**

YVONNE RIDLEY said that if you keyed in 'Islam' into a search engine, you were 100 times more likely to come up with 'terrorism' than if you keyed in Christianity or Judaism. But the primary source of resistance was the illegal occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. Terrorism is stateless. It can never be defeated by force. Police had raided 3,000 Muslim homes since 9/11. There had been 1,000 arrests, only 70 charges and 6 convictions. Meanwhile the effect was to terrorise the Muslim community. Rather than looking to the Muslim community, we should root out the religious extremists in Downing St and the White House. It was western extremism that had brought rendition flights, kidnap and torture. The question is who will bring the real war criminals to justice – Bush and Blair? The Muslim community can not rely on Muslim leaders who have castrated themselves in an attempt to please the government. She told the conference to remember that the 'great' never look that great when you stand up and get off your knees.

PROF. STEVEN ROSE mentioned Tony Blair's 'slip of the tongue' in agreeing that the war in Iraq is a disaster in an interview with David Frost on Al-Jazeera Television. Put that against the Daily Express headline 'Family Fury at Halal Christmas Dinner'. This was the level of the debate in much of the media. But while Judaism and Christianity were considered a race, for the purposes of incitement to 'racial' hatred, Islam was not, as witnessed by the acquittal of Nick Griffin. None of these are a 'race'. You can convert to any of these religions and then leave the faith. There was sufficient legislation already to deal with incitement to violence or hate speech. He suggested, as a small act of solidarity, that we write to Christine Morgan, the producer of The Moral Maze on BBC Radio 4, condemning the BBC for supplying a platform for fascists. The solution to the problems in the Middle East was not in Baghdad but in Jerusalem. There would be no satisfactory solution while the Palestinians remained an oppressed people. Blair had to accept both the right of the Palestinian people NOT to accept being broken up into a series of Bantustans, and the right of return for the Palestinian Diaspora. The cause of immigration could best be explained by the Caribbean response decades ago: "We're here, because you were there."

DAVID EDGAR said he was not a believer; but a fervent defender of various principles which increasingly appear to run counter to equally fervently held religious principles. To be honest, he thinks the politicisation of religion is a regrettable and increasingly dangerous phenomenon. He wished that people of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin in Britain still pursued their considerable

grievances through the political and industrial channels and with the secular language in which they pursued them in the 1970s, while understanding why they don't. He was here because there is still racism. Clearly, racial hatred is now being expressed in the vocabulary of religious hatred and not just by Nick Griffin. And he was also here because the demonisation of Islam in particular is creating dangerous cracks in the progressive alliance in this country. In particular, the issue of "multiculturalism" is digging a new fault line between supporters of the left liberal social agenda - free speech, women's and gay rights - and Muslims. Sexual freedom and freedom of speech are recent, hard-fought, still controversial and insecure victories. It's not just Daily Express readers who have such trouble with Salma Yaqoob's point that you can defend the right not to wear the niqab in countries where it is compulsory as fervently as you defend the right to wear it here. We can take lessons from the civil rights movement; that there is value in people from very different and what might seem incompatible cultures, listening to and learning from each other. We must point out the hypocrisy of people who support freedom of speech and opinion when it suits them and don't when it doesn't. We need to initiate a grown-up debate, not about how newcomers might assimilate themselves into a fixed and unchanging Britain, but how a mature, modern, multicultural democracy might grow and develop and deepen in the future.

ABDUL REHMAN-MALIK (from Q News) said that the anti-war movement had to be broad and inclusive and allow for different levels of engagement. Now the veneer of tolerance was slipping, Jack Straw actually did us a favour. He showed us how elite our intelligentsia has become. While watching some old footage from the Civil Rights marches in the 60s, he was reminded of one of the songs that came out of the Civil Rights Movement: *Eyes on the Prize*. The first words of this song are: "The only thing that we did right, was the day we began to fight, keep your eyes on the prize, hold on ...". What is the prize? We have to create a positive vision and describe what the society we want will look like. We have to stake our claim to the public square.

SALMA YAQOOB gave her usual clear, cogent argument on why we had to resist. She repeated the three principles of the Stop the War Coalition: 1) to Stop the War; 2) to defend civil liberties and 3) to fight the racist backlash. The struggle had to be anti-imperialist. 'Extremism' had existed pre-9/11 because of Western intervention in the Middle East. We had to stop attacks on multiculturalism. The defence of Muslim communities is a defence of all faith communities and minorities. Not very long ago, the press and government were shouting about 'black muggers'. Steve Lawrence died because of the institutionalised racism in the police force. It took decades of struggle to change this view. Now the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) is part of the problem. Trevor Phillips wants to blame the victims by talking about "self-segregating communities" and arguing that "multiculturalism should be killed off". We reject these ideas. Instead, we should refocus on anti-racist work. Finally, we have to take up the question of 'class'. Poverty and economic disadvantage creates a situation of resentment and fighting between communities for resources. Instead we should search for common interest and fight for economic justice for all.

The final session was on **Organising to Stop the Backlash**

JEREMY CORBYN referred to the PM's slip of the tongue on the David Frost show. When a government spokesman was asked about this, his reply was, "The PM always agrees with the questioner, whatever the question." This was news to all those who have opposed the war and New Labour policies for years. Stop the War Coalition had not only predicted the events that have subsequently taken place, but, more importantly, provided the forum for different communities to come together. Islamophobia was another form of attacks on ethnic communities previously directed at the Irish, Jews and Blacks. The Muslim community was the most recent manifestation. Previous groups had been pilloried, made the object of jokes, denied employment and demonised.

We are witnessing a new growth of the power of the state over the people, which must also be resisted.

ADAM PRICE (Plaid Cymru) said that the US veto on the 11 November was the 43rd time the US had vetoed a resolution condemning Israel since 1972. This government was continuing to support despotic, autocratic regimes in the Middle East because of 'oil'. Who first used the tactic of suicide bombing in the region? It was Al Dawa, Iraqi PM Nuri al-Maliki's party against the Iraqi Embassy in Beirut, and later in Kuwait. Yet this is who Bush and Blair now cosy up to in Iraq. After being defeated by 25 votes in Parliament on the 31st October to force an Inquiry into the causes and conduct of the Iraq War, he and Jeremy Corbyn will be putting down a motion – an amendment to the Queen's Speech – on Thursday, 23rd November calling for parliamentary accountability over the war. He was confident that, if recognised by the Speaker, they had every chance of winning. It will be the first time since 1924 that an amendment to the Queen's Speech has been successful.

CRAIG MURRAY stood against Jack Straw in his Blackburn constituency. Women had been wearing the niqab for years. Straw's statement was a considered, calculated move; an effort to jump on the bandwagon of Islamophobia. He pointed out that 250 years ago, the wearing of the kilt was punishable by death; 200 years ago, by transportation. He defended everybody's freedom to pursue a religion. In Uzbekistan, people were tortured for their religion and the West was receiving intelligence as a result of torture. Murray told the UK government that this evidence was suspect. But what difference did that make to a government that was regularly sending Muslims to be tortured in Syria through extraordinary rendition. The people he talked to admitted that the 'intelligence' was untrue but said it was 'operationally useful'. So when Manningham-Buller says there are 1,600 active terrorists operating in Britain, she is not making an educated guess, she is LYING. The government has stoked Islamophobia, so that the British public will accept the deaths of 655,000 Iraqi civilians, because they have been dehumanised. The Muslim community under its present leadership seemed to be sleepwalking and unaware of the dangers by maintaining a pathetic loyalty to the Labour Party which is persecuting it. During the election campaign, Murray and Ridley were denied access to any Mosque by the regional councils of Mosques. The fight against Islamophobia would be won on the streets. It was a long, unglamorous struggle, but we need to be there – all there – together.

MOHAMMED ALI from the Islam Channel cited a tabloid paper which wrote that what Muslims have in common is that they are all like dogs. What Muslims actually have in common is their humanity. When a black man is attacked, this is called racist. When a Jew is attacked, this is called anti-semitism. But when a Muslim is attacked, it is called 'the right to free expression'. When Jack Straw said he was not happy to talk to a woman wearing the veil, he should know that a Muslim woman is not there to please Jack Straw. What we want is a respectful society. We believe that diversity is a sign of the creator and we should be proud of it. We have much in common; some small things are different. We have to respect that.